

Requiem For A Game

A Novel by Robert Williams

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Foreword

Dedicated to all the university and college presidents around this great land of ours, with hopes that they will be the ones who will begin a period of enlightenment that has been sorely lacking. It's unfortunate that the medical school deans didn't lead the way many, many years ago.

"Sacred cows make the tastiest hamburger."

--Abbie Hoffman

1. My Egg

One.

That's all you get. One egg, that is. Don't believe me? Go look in the mirror. How many eggs do you see staring back at you? Exactly one, I hope, or your egg is more fucked up than mine. One fucking egg. Think long and hard about that the next time you tune into a football game on your favorite sports network and get a hard-on while you watch handsome young men bust up their eggs for you. I want you to think about it because I think about it a lot. That's because my egg is scrambled. I'm talking poached, fried, over-easy, hard-boiled, soft-boiled, coddled, huevos rancheros, pickled, smoked--*Eggs Benedict* for the fancier folks in the press boxes with season tickets--whatever you want to choose from the menu. It's a goddam Denver omelet in here--a clusterfuck of a goddam clusterfuck. Denver is one cold-ass place to play football in the wintertime. That mile-high hurts something fierce on Monday morning when you roll over in bed and grope around with your filthy hands for the *Vicodin--Oxycontin* if you're lucky--and the three hits of speed you need to wake up. I like Blue and Clears speed. That's what I call them because they're blue on one half and they're clear on the other half. Doctors used to give them to bored housewives, so they can't be too bad for you. You know, so the housewives would vacuum the house before their husbands got home. Speed made those housewives horny as hell. They'd suck up the dirt with their new Hoovers then do the same to their old man's junk like there was no tomorrow. Not a bad deal for the dudes--the fat-fucks. That's what we called them. The fans--the ghouls--the armchair quarterbacks--the another-excuse-to-get-drunk assholes in the stands wearing the jerseys with their faces painted up, swilling down flat stadium beer, all out to witness the egg busting spectacle. Fat-fucks. Sorry if you're one of them. And sorry for the wandering, but I'm getting there--slowly. My egg wandering in the woods is part of my condition and that's sort of what this book is about. It's not a fairy tale. It's a goddam nightmare. The nightmare, the truth I'm talking about is how young men get tricked into busting their beautiful, fragile young eggs in order to sell Bud Light and Buicks to the fat-fucks while housewives on speed sneak back to the laundry room and masturbate to the *Crate & Barrel* catalog. Women were the ones who were the hope--they were supposed to say no, enough is enough. Please get your hand out of your pants and put the *Crate & Barrel* stuff porn catalog down ladies and lend a hand here.

Before I get any further, I heard a rumor. I'm tied into these sorts of things, rumors that is, so you can believe me. Honest. Stanford is getting rid of its football program. It's just a rumor, but if somebody's going to do it, Stanford is the place. We're talking about the Stanford Cardinals, big time egg busting college football. Looks like somebody got

through to a major university and they finally understand what we're talking about. You could call it the political climate of the day, whatever you like. California schools are way ahead of all the other asshole universities out there, say the ones in Texas which will be the last places to give up football egg busting for reasons I'd have to write an entire new book to explain. Maybe Stanford decided to be first because Stanford owns half of Northern California and they really don't need the money generated by the egg busting of 20-year-old men. So, there, spread the word that Stanford football will be no more, no more pimping out to the cocksucking NFL. One down. Gotta wonder why Stanford's "uber-liberal" rival Berkeley didn't beat it to the punch. Oh, I know why. They lipstick liberals, purely for show.

Back to me and my egg and that sad story. Twenty-thousand hits is what the doctor told me the average NFL linebacker or lineman takes to his egg in a career. That's more cock than the best hippie chick following the Grateful Dead sucked by a factor of ten. Or, put another way, it's about the same number of women raped each year by fraternity boys at schools like the University of Virginia. The University of Virginia relishes in its traditions: Thomas Jefferson, football, Thomas Jefferson, fraternity boys wearing blue blazers and orange UVA ties and chino shorts, Thomas Jefferson, basketball, Thomas Jefferson, a second-rate state school trying to act like an Ivy league school but with no chance now because its administration continued to let fraternity boys carry on the their fathers' tradition of raping young women, Thomas Jefferson, fraternity boys raping girls and getting away with it. I'm sure your favorite college or university has its own traditions, just like the University of Virginia, unless it's been overrun by Asians. Asians are new to the frat rape thing, but give them time and they'll adapt to the good-ole boy ways. Everybody who comes to America adapts to the good-ole boy ways eventually. And before you get too pissed off about the Asian stuff and call me a nasty name (which I'm sure you've already done and I thank your pansy, hacky-sack playing, porn-surfing, status quo loving ass for that), think about the odd culture of a university: the smart people, Asians and everybody else who works hard to get there, get an education without getting their heads banged up. That's a beautiful, amazing thing, the way things are supposed to work. But the football players, who are more often than not considered to be not that smart, and let's be frank, are also considered by all non-cotton patch folks (the cotton patch is what players call the football field in case you didn't know) to be the *hired help*. Hired by the inebriated college president cocksucker pimps sitting in the big house on the hill to get their eggs slammed and cracked and banged and smashed and busted and turned to jello--all for you, all to make your dick hard, if you have one. Consider that the next time you sit your sorry drunk ass down in the stands of your favorite college football game, thinking about the frat party later on at Kappa Sig where the *Rohypnol* will flow freely, furnished of course by the pre-med students (Rohypnol is Roofies, the date rape drug, but you already knew that).

Twenty-thousand hits to my egg. You do the math. Most of us started playing football when we were six, seven, eight years old. That comes out to about 20 to 25 years of egg scrambling. A lot of that egg scrambling happens in practice, away from the television cameras and the Budweiser and Buick commercials. The ratio of practicing football to actually playing a football game on television is at least 100 to 1, probably more. So for every one hit I took on television for you and your fat-fuck friends, I took 100 hits in practice. Think about it. I think about it a lot.

The doctor had all sorts of X-rays and CAT scans and MRIs and other images and data and tests and assays he showed me to prove my egg was fucked up as a can of worms on a Mississippi riverbank in July. "Sawbones" is what I call him. "Humpty Dumpty" is what I told him to call me because that's what I call myself. I guess you figured out by now that I played a lot of football--way too much football for my egg or anybody's egg for that matter. I was a linebacker in the NFL. A football is shaped like an egg, sort of. Just thought I'd let you know. I didn't play for Denver, in case you were wondering. Here's a little rhyme I keep on my desk:

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the college presidents and medical school deans and all the cocksuckers at HBO and ESPN,
Couldn't put Humpty's fucking egg back together again.

Trading money for your goddam egg. What kind of a fucking bargain is that? Let me backtrack a little--sort of like Goldilocks should have done, when she was knocking on Kappa Sig's door at two o'clock in the morning at the University of Virginia. Guess I ought to let you know something--I'm drunk--stinking drunk. It helps my egg relax when I'm trying to think. I stayed up for three days and nights trying to finish this goddam book or whatever you want to call it. I took 12 hits of speed, did 4 grams of coke (Peruvian Snowflake, it's better than Colombian), and drank 2 gallons of Old Crow and the best part of a quart of absinthe--the little green fairy stuff. I'm drunk and speeding like a cat with gasoline poured all over its ass and lit with a Zippo. Old Crow is old man booze. It's rotgut. That's all they had at the store down the street. There was a playoff game and they had a run on booze. I've never had absinthe before. It's supposed to make you see things like little green fairies. Artists and writers in Paris a long time ago claimed it helped them be more creative, let them free the muse. I'm seeing things, but I don't think it's the absinthe because the kind we get in America doesn't have the right kind of wormwood in it. The right kind of wormwood--the kind you get in France or Europe--has *Thujone* in it, which is a kind of natural speed that makes you see things--like little green fairies. That Sawbones doctor gives me another kind of speed. *Ritalin*. It's decent speed, nothing great. He says it helps my brain catch up and function normally--almost. They give the same shit to kids with ADHD. Giving speed to eight-year-old boys and bored housewives.

I'm not sure about those sawbones sometimes, especially the ones who run medical schools at colleges that have football teams. I'll get to that later. I'll get to college presidents later too. They're the big bosses who live in the big white mansions on the hill to the doctors who run medical schools at colleges that have football teams. I dedicated this book to college presidents because when you think about it, they're the cocksuckers who keep the egg-cracking business going. They live in those pretty, tall white mansions up on the hill at your favorite college (university, if you prefer), drinking Mint Juleps on the veranda and watching the boys play football. And they usually have a pretty good view of the other tall white mansions down on fraternity row where there's a whole other sort of busting business going on, with pretty young Goldilocks knocking at the door.

College presidents spit shine and polish up young eggs so they can become better egg crackers for the NFL, while servants bring them trays full of food. Spit shine and polish them up so good it'll make your dick hard. Maybe you remember that other thing Abbie Hoffman said. He said a lot of things. You might not even know who he is, but here is something else Abbie Hoffman said, "The only reason you should be in college is to destroy it." I think he was onto something. I don't advocate violence of any kind, even though I was a linebacker in the NFL. Abbie Hoffman was a Yippie. All the Yippies are dead, just like everything else from the sixties that sounded sort of like a good idea: hippies, peace and love, instant karma, entitlement programs, free love, free lunches, *freedom*, Marxism, Feminism. The fatal flaw of Hippie was treating women like shit. The dudes in Hippie got a super deal, free and clear pussy, an all-you-care-to-eat dessert bar. The women got the clap and the kids, the shit end of the stick as usual. Somebody always loses in a three-way. The fatal flaw of Feminism was treating women like shit, leading them like cows with nose rings who'd chew the cud of whatever these newly minted university *intellectuals* could spew into the trough. The three-way for the feminists was being placated by the ossified university phalluses who threw them the bone in the form of *faux academic* Gender Studies programs. Feminism's final coffin nail was Google Porn, or *free will*, as the Googlers like to spin it. It goes by another name: Corporate Greed. Google makes more money in a weekend by providing free-and-clear access to pornography than the gross domestic product of all the countries below the equator combined. Google's genius was putting one degree of separation between flat-out exploitation (the dirty work) and the bank. And it turned out that women like to watch porn and whack off to porn just like guys like to watch porn and whack off to porn. Hence, we now live in a masturbatory culture--a society of satiety--that is content with having a date with a plastic device rather than a person--an *information technology* economy built on the slimy bedrock of pornography. The feminists, distracted by their stillborn gender victim academia, didn't factor into their Rube Goldberg machine calculus that free will, in the form of soothing the pleasure receptors of the brain, is a goddam hard thing to put into a box and

contain, much less understand and codify and try to override. Once those circuits have been activated, they demand constant dilatation, something that comes in the form of exploitation of others (the *Dalit* caste), with seemingly no ill effects for the exploiter. Football players occupy the Dalit caste, the untouchables. We expect them do the lower-order work that is subordinate to the consumer, the viewer, the college student, the college president pimp-ocracy, the drunk fat-fuck in the stands--me and you. But with dilatation comes curettage--and that painful procedure is long overdue if the patient is to survive.

Remember what Abbie Hoffman said about sacred cows turning into hamburger? Even Abbie Hoffman and the Yippies became sacred cows and got chewed up in the meat grinder. Football is going to become chopped sirloin in a few years. Lawyers are going to bury football like the *Cosa Nostra* did to Jimmy Hoffa at Giants Stadium in East Rutherford, New Jersey. They buried him alive in the concrete of the northwest end zone, or so they say. Lawyers are going to turn football into a queer sport akin to professional wrestling, where the millionaire players don't actually get hit in their eggs, or what's left of their eggs. It'll be lingerie football, panty ball. And that's a good thing. The bad thing is that for the players to get to the NFL and play this panty ball, high school and college kids still have to bust their eggs to prove they're good enough to become professional wrestler NFL lingerie panty football players. That's when the fickle-finger of egg busting will point exactly where it should have always been pointing: at the college presidents who bait children then pimp them out to the NFL. The medical school deans share the blame as well. They should've been having sit-ins at the college president's office years ago when their research discovered just what football does to young eggs. In case you're wondering what it does, I'll tell you. It fucks them up. What did the medical school deans do with this knowledge? Nothing. Too many sacred cows. But sacred cows make tasty hamburger. Abbie Hoffman was right about that. I'll save fraternities and the university-sponsored rape culture for later. More sacred cows. Yummy. We're going to have a good meal here.

All the other sacred cows will fall eventually, just like the hippies and peace and love and Communism and Feminism and all the other -isms. The original hippies declared Hippie dead in San Francisco in 1967's Summer of Love, and gave Hippie its funeral rites in a march down Haight Street. At least they had the decency to give their shitty Hippie idea a proper funeral, complete with the Grateful Dead playing the dirge. Too bad the Dead didn't pay attention to the song they were singing and save a whole generation of people--lost souls--who ended up with vacant looks in their eyes. All that talk about love a peace and freedom and you ended up staring at the sun holding what's left of your brain in your hand. Sugar Magnolia should've flown the Cuckoo's Nest and gone back to Kansas while she had a chance. Being stoned and getting raped and exploited does not advance

consciousness or civilization. Hippie was a precursor to what Aldous Huxley predicted and is now in full blown presentation to the horrified physician. That chemical nirvana and living in the narcoleptic coma of material consumption combined with the constant intravenous drip of pornography in lieu of physical contact with humans have replaced the iron fist of the dictator as a means of controlling the masses and stopping them from thinking and rebelling against the machine, a machine that will devour you without you even knowing you're being eaten alive. Football and its culture of voyeuristic pleasure entertainment where the observer has no stake, no participation in the true brutality and banality of the sport except as a dullard to be placated by commercial interests, is just another symptom of the machine spinning and gyrating on its wobbly axis, out of control, headed either for its Shakespearean death knell or for the complete subjugation of those who stare at its enchanting phosphorescent-green glow long enough. Technology is not the legacy of the present age; pornography and cartoons to serve the corporation's bottom line are its icy legacy. And make no mistake, there is only one corporation, one that has no allegiance to political boundaries or ideas or mantras or creeds or sanity. It is the one corporation that will soon devour you if it hasn't already done so.

As you can see, this book isn't just about football. And even though I'm a dumb guy who was dumb enough to play pro football, I can still think and reason, sort of. Somehow I got some sort of education when I went to college, unlike a lot of the other players I knew. This book is about a lot of things that are related to things we think we love--sacred cows--things that will change--things that need to change--things that you didn't even think about that need to change--if we're going to move to the next level. The next level is seeing violence and exploitation for what they are, no matter how they're hidden and slicked up like Budweiser or Buick commercials or Grateful Dead songs or Google Porn, so all the Easily Amused fat-fucks can get their hard-ons and the corporation can get richer and become an even greater abstraction behind its smoky glass walls. It's time to move on so we can turn the sacred cows we're creating now into more hamburger. It never ends. If it ends, there's no more hamburger and you starve. And then you're dead, unless you're already dead, which, according to my calculations, there's probably a 50/50 chance of that.

2. Mr. E.P. Rose

Before I get to the real story--the fiction--I need to introduce you to someone. His name is Mr. E.P. Rose. Mr. Rose is helping me write this thing. He helped me with the fiction, the prose as he calls it. Fucking words are what I call it. He said that I can call him Mr. Edward P. Rose or Mr. E.P. Rose or Mr. E. Rose or Mr. Rose or just E.P., since he'd rather not be mentioned by his real name. Mr. Edward P. Rose would rather not be mentioned by his real name because he doesn't want large men showing up at his house in the middle of the night swinging 38-inch Hillerich & Bradsby Louisville Slugger baseball bats. They're usually made of white ash taken from trees in the backwoods of Pennsylvania, although I suspect they're now being made by 13-year-old Chinese factory girls out of carbon landfill residue so China can secretly ship its CO2 waste back to the United States. Ash is a very hard wood. If you get hit in the egg with one of those bats, you're pretty much done, so I can't blame Mr. Rose for being concerned. This is, after all, a book about football and a lot of other things that are going to piss off a lot of people, including Goldilocks knocking on Kappa Sig's front door after the big game on Saturday and Google porn and hippies and women getting fucked over with no end in sight, except they think things are just great because they have all the shit they need. You know, creature comforts and cheap electronic gadgets for showing the world your online happy face, all assembled by Asian factory girls who dream of being American movie stars. I'm covering a lot of ground here. You're probably pissed off at me and I hope so. I'm pissed off at you because there's a good chance you watched me and my friends bust our eggs out in the cotton patch. That's what we call the football field in case you didn't know. Words are one thing, but getting your egg busted 20,000 times for fat-fucks to jerk off to is another thing. You end up walking around a nursing home with piss-stained pajamas 30 years too soon.

Mr. E.P. Rose is real smart. He went to an Ivy League school in Connecticut. He's proud of that and he lets people know every chance he gets. I'm sure you know the place. Mr. Rose never got his egg cracked playing football in college because he stayed in the library most of the fucking time reading books. He protected his egg. He even wore a helmet when he played racquetball. When I was in college, they gave me a goddam scholarship to crash my egg into other eggs as hard as I could. They even gave me a big shiny gold and silver trophy with things that looked like diamonds on top for crashing my egg into other eggs as hard as I could. The president of the college shook my hand and had his picture taken with me for crashing my egg into other eggs as hard as I could. Crashing my egg into other eggs as hard as I could paid my room and board. Crashing my egg into other eggs as hard as I could gave me a summer job, where I didn't really do anything except show up every now and then after practice, and sometimes fuck the boss's daughter. She liked football

players. A lot of women like to fuck football players. I can't blame them. I'd fuck them too if I were a woman. Why fuck a fat-fuck when you can have a football player? Crashing my egg into other eggs as hard as I could got me all the food and Goldilocks I could stand. And the eggs I crashed my egg into at the other colleges did the same thing, because it got them all the food and Goldilocks they could stand. Food and Goldilocks are good reasons to crash your egg into other eggs, especially when you came up poor like me. Food and Goldilocks. Those college presidents use very good bait to hook those eggs. They're smart. That's why they're college presidents, and that's why I'm sitting here with a busted egg drinking cheap booze and slugging back little green fairy absinthe and snorting Peruvian Snowflake.

That was college. When I got to the NFL, they cracked their eggs even harder and they gave you lots of money and even more poontang (Goldilocks sometimes). They even gave you cars and big rings and fur coats that made you look like Dolomite (he was a pimp) for cracking your egg into other eggs. Egg cracking is a business. A mean and nasty business run by cocksuckers who don't give a shit about eggs. This story I'm writing with the help of Mr. Rose is about some people I knew. It all happened a few years ago. I won't tell you how long. Doesn't matter because it's fiction, sort of. I'm sure you know how that goes. It's a story about a kid named Billy, his mother, Ivy, and his uncle Jerry. Jerry was a linebacker in the NFL. Jerry's egg is almost as fucked up as mine, but it's just starting for him--the egg fucked-up realization business. And he's scared and he's pissed off because he's going to realize that whitey tricked him again. Oh yes, Jerry's a black guy--African-American if you prefer. A lot of football players are black in case you didn't know.

Mr. Edward P. Rose was worried about using the word "egg" too much. He told me he took lots of classes on things like that where he and other students would sit around taking swipes at each other's work. Not quite like cracking eggs, but it made him a better writer. At least that's what he told me. I said this to Mr. E.P. Rose.

"What else you want me to call my brain? How many other words are there?"

Mr. E.P. Rose came up with about 20 other words--synonyms--but they all mean the same thing to me. Egg. I'll list some of his synonyms on the left, and on the right is what they mean to me:

Brain = Egg
Head = Egg
Skull = Egg
Noggin = Egg
Cerebrum = Egg
Noodle = Egg
Cranium = Egg
Banana = Egg
Yolk = Egg (Yolk is pretty close though)
Place that fucking college presidents don't give a fuck about = Egg
Place that medical college deans don't give a fuck about = Egg
Place that you fucking live = Egg
Place that contains every thought you ever had up until the last one = Egg
Place that contains your memory of your first kiss = Egg

Place that contains your goddam mind = Egg

See, egg is much simpler, only three letters and two are the same, so it's really only two letters. My college president (university, if you prefer) shook my hand more than once for cracking my egg against other eggs from other colleges that were run by college presidents who shook the hands of other egg crackers--ad infinitum. That's a lot of cracked eggs. And that's a lot of college presidents who should've known better. Here's a sample letter I wrote to my college president in case you want to use it to write your own letter to your college (university, if you prefer) president. You can also send one to your medical school dean if you want. More sample letters are listed in the back of this book in case this one doesn't suit your needs. There's also an example of what 20,000 egg hits looks like. That's about how many hits an NFL linebacker or lineman takes to his egg in a career.

Dear Cocksucker,
What gives you the right to pimp out young eggs to the NFL? Is it because you want your alumni to keep sending wheelbarrows full of cash to your tall white mansion on the hill?
Kind Regards,
<YOUR NAME>
P.S. You might consider locking up the fraternity boys' supply of *Rohypnol* (Roofies if you prefer--it's the date rape drug, but you already know that since I'm sure you have a private stash in the guest bedroom in the big house).

This thing I'm trying to write has put me in a nasty mood. I think I'll snort some more coke and take a couple more hits of speed and finish off the absinthe. I'm still waiting to see a little green fairy. You're welcome to read on. I'll try and stay out of the way. It's Mr. E.P. Rose's turn now, so I'll shut up. Mr. Rose is a much better writer than me. He's a little nervous, so please be nice to him. I'll check in with you later. Okay, cheerleaders gather around with your pom-poms and let's give a cheer for Mr. Edward P. Rose. You're all invited to the frat party later. Maybe the college president will show up with some Rebel Yell and *Rohypnol* and we'll all head down to frat row at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. Somebody call up the sorority girls and it'll be a party.

3. Jammer Jerr

The clap of helmets and shoulder pads sent Jerry Gotschall's mind flashing back--again--to how he had lived a good part of his life--playing football as a linebacker. He stared straight through the high school football scrimmage that was going on out on the bright green field, a distant look in his soft brown eyes. He was staring into the sky at a flock of birds in the blue Carolina sky. Carolina blue--the color of the University of North Carolina Tarheels uniforms--had been trademarked by UNC. The circuitous logic went something like this: God had to be a Tarheel, why else would he make the sky Carolina blue?

One bird wavered, unable to keep up with the group. Maybe it had been wounded by a hunter. Jerry didn't know what kind of birds they were. They didn't look like geese or ducks, more like smaller birds, maybe starlings. The wounded bird dipped below the others, struggling to keep up, but it was obvious it would not make it back up to the flock. With each beat of its wings, the bird dropped lower, lower, lower, until it tumbled onto the turf. Jerry could see its form, motionless in the distance. It lay on a hash mark of the football field near the 50 yard line. Nobody seemed to notice the bird except for Jerry. He looked back into the sky. The other birds were headed south on their flight. They were nothing more than a crooked V in the sky now. None had looked back at their comrade who lay on the field in a crumpled grey heap.

Jerry wasn't one who looked for signs in the sky or anywhere else, but lately, Jerry's mind was going somewhere far away, to places Jerry didn't even know existed--to places that frightened Jerry. In a split second, just as a man saw his life flash before his eyes, Jerry could see every punishing hit he ever gave or took--thousands upon thousands--the guttural sounds and images of men grunting, yelling, screaming, being hit, faces pummeled, bones snapping, sinew tearing. The flash images--the smells--the tastes--sweat, blood, spit, piss, snot, shit, broken teeth, broken bones--a finger lying in the dirt, a cleated leg, fans cheering like wild animals, a bloody ear hanging loose, a lacerated eyeball, white bone sticking out of black flesh, white bone sticking out of white flesh, men crying. Flesh and bone--bone and flesh--all the images were jumbled up in a blurry mix in Jerry's head. It had to mean something. There had to be a reason to this place he was going.

Jerry's mind was his being, a strange entity that would never be understood by medical science. It was mysteriously connected to a physical organ, his brain. A brain that had been smacked and slapped and buffeted and beaten thousands of times. Only God could know the number of insults--the feet-pounds of pressure, torque, acceleration, angular momentum, moments of inertia,

the forces--the bio-dynamics of a six-pound organ enclosed in bone, assaulted in its sacred womb for years on end. This was where Jerry lived. This was his house, his home. And he'd traded it in a bargain with something that was seductive and inviting, an irresistible mistress. A monster.

A shrill coach's whistle pulled Jerry back out of his place. Maybe it was just getting older. Maybe everybody went to that place in one way or another. At 44, Jerry Gotschall--"Jammer Jerr"--wore the hunkered body of an aging athlete like a suit of armor. He was dressed in the usual attire, a tattered track suit and a beat-up Atlanta football cap. Jerry had kept his weight in check, holding right at 235 pounds, which was his playing weight the first game he played in the NFL. That weight was light these days for an NFL linebacker. Size was the game now. The more energy you could generate and transfer to the opponent, the better. Force equals mass times acceleration. It was a beautifully simple equation from Isaac Newton. More mass and more speed equaled more force to the opponent's body, their brain.

Jerry had gotten his nickname because of the way he could jam up an offensive line and stop running backs cold in their tracks. He made up for his light weight with speed. In his prime, he seemed to have the ability to be anywhere on the field, somehow at the same time. He was good, but he didn't play the game like some of his fellow players had played it. The announcer jobs, the car dealerships, the restaurant franchises--they never came. Jerry didn't have the bullshit personality to be an A-Lister, but he did come out with a string of car washes in the Raleigh-Durham area called "The Linebacker." It wasn't bad for a poor black kid from Durham, North Carolina, whose grandfather and father both worked at the same Belk's department store in downtown Durham as janitors.

Lately, the "Jammer Jerr" nickname had taken on a new meaning with the business problems and the girls and the drugs. It wasn't that much different than the old days but Jerry didn't have anybody to pull him out now--nobody to watch his back. It was just him. The glory days of football were just memories and photographs and rings and the other shit you could lock up in a glass case and look at. His phone rang. He answered, and held his hand over his other ear, then said only four words.

"Five hundred on Dallas."

He snapped the phone off like he'd once snapped the legs on halfbacks back in the day.

It was a sweltering, early fall North Carolina day. The growing shadows were the only hint that summer would ever release its fiendish grip. Cheerleaders and other onlookers tried to find shade as they watched the Hillside High football team in the scrimmage. A handmade banner read SLAUGHTER DUDLEY.

Jerry was standing near a group of coaches and trainers. The head coach, whose name was Jimmy Sauerbeck, blew his whistle, wiped large beads of sweat off his brow, then barked orders and spit at the same time, some of the pre-requisite talents of all high school football coaches.

“Take Fitzgerald out and put Gotschall back in. Goddam second stringers.”

He shot another stream of spit again towards the starting quarterback, Billy Gotschall. Billy was 17-years-old and the star quarterback who proudly wore the number 5 on his sparkling blue-and-white Hillside Hornets jersey. He was Jerry's nephew. The resemblance was remarkable, even the way they carried themselves was similar. Billy was thinner than Jerry, weighing in at 210 pounds soaking wet, and he was an inch taller at six-four. But he was the perfect size for a quarterback. Not too tall and awkward that he couldn't run--just tall enough to see and throw over the defensive linemen. Jerry always righted his posture whenever he saw his nephew, almost as a way of reminding himself that there was something good in his life. Jerry yelled out to Billy and clapped his hands.

“That's what I'm talking about. Okay, Slick, show these clowns how it's done. Only got two weeks to get this show on the road. Let's go.”

Slick was Jerry's pet name for Billy. He'd called him that ever since Billy was three-years-old and had gotten his first haircut, one of those scalp jobs by a barber who'd been hitting the hooch too hard. Jerry and Billy had always been close, even before Billy's father William had died. William was Jerry's brother and they'd never been on good terms with each other. Billy somehow gave them the bridge they needed. And Billy's natural athletic ability mimicked Jerry's own skills. They were both good at any sport they tried. Football happened to be the one they were best at. The cheerleaders practiced a new cheer as Billy and the team huddled. Billy called the play.

“Thirty-two, rodeo, right on nine--”

Billy broke the huddle and lined up in shotgun formation. He barked out the signals.

“One, twenty--eight--eighteen--seventy-twooooo-- “

The center shot the ball back to Billy. He grabbed the ball with one-handed confidence, faked a handoff, and bootlegged it back to pass. The defense took the bait, and Billy was in the clear with plenty of time to throw. Coach Sauerbeck yelled.

“Two hands, Billy. That ain't a fucking loaf of Wonderbread.”

Out of nowhere, a huge linebacker made a beeline for Billy's blindside. The linebacker was a second-stringer and he was out to make the team. His name was Heffinger. He was slow but he was huge, pushing 280 pounds. Jerry saw Heffinger and suddenly he was in the moment again, digging his face mask into the clean white numbers of a quarterback's chest. He could hear and feel the gut

wrenching sound of flesh and bone colliding, of lungs being compressed. Heffinger gained momentum. The lumbering giant looked like a freight train going down a grade. The coaches saw it. Jerry saw it. Nobody could stop it. It was like slow motion. Heffinger speared Billy's legs low and from behind, sending Billy into a backwards flip. Billy did a somersault and landed on his head. The crash was like a bolt of lightning hitting a nearby tree that took a fraction of a second to reach the ears. The thud was all too familiar to Jerry. He instinctively knew something was wrong and ran out onto the field. Coach Sauerbeck and the other coaches ran out, followed by the trainers. The cheerleaders watched expectantly, putting hands to their mouths, as Billy's body convulsed on the green field near the dead bird that Jerry had seen fall. One pretty red-haired cheerleader named Elisa Chalmers had big tears in her big green eyes. She was Billy's girlfriend.

4. Ivy

Short Stuff's Barbecue restaurant was one of those smoky Carolina barbecue joints where you could almost taste the food when you drove past. This was pork barbecue, North Carolina style, the way God intended for barbecue to be made and served, with sweet coleslaw and a hint of sauce. God had gotten two things right in North Carolina: barbecue and the color of the sky. A small handmade sign near the entrance advised patrons that if they wanted beef barbecue, they should drive west about a thousand miles or so and hang a left into the state of Texas, or a right toward Kansas City. Memorabilia of college and professional teams and sports stars lined the smoky walls--the University of North Carolina, North Carolina State, Duke, Virginia, Washington, Atlanta, Jacksonville, Philadelphia, Tennessee. There was an autographed picture of Muhammad Ali, mugging for the camera in his usual way, and taking a bite of ribs while shaking hands with the owner, Shorty.

Billy's mother, Ivy, was painting letters on a banner. She was a heavy-set woman, with quick brown eyes and a sad smile that hinted that life had dealt her a lot of pain. She'd lost her husband, William, eight years ago and now she was raising Billy on her own. William wasn't her first husband. Her first husband beat her. She kept a butcher knife under the bed, waiting for the time when she'd be forced to use it. She winged him once with a pair of scissors. That kept him away from her for almost a year. Then he tried to kill her again. This time she jabbed a rusty ice pick between his shoulder blades. That put him in the Duke University hospital for two weeks with *septicaemia*--blood poisoning. The day he got out of the hospital, he went to the first convenience store he could find, bought two fifths of Mad Dog 20/20, then staggered onto the train tracks and was promptly run over by an Amtrak train--*The Silver Star*--which was headed south to Florida, full of snowbird New Yorkers on cell phones and laptops. Ivy was called to identify the body, which lay in a crooked heap beside the tracks. All she remembered was the well-dressed people on the train, reading newspapers, talking on their phones, anxious to head to the Florida sunshine. As she looked at their faces, she realized they didn't give a damn about a decapitated black man on the side of the tracks with an MD 20/20 bottle slammed into his mouth. Neither did she. She didn't go to his funeral.

Ivy met her second husband, William, at church. She wasn't much of a church goer, but she went to funerals and weddings just to keep up with everybody. She and William weren't in love. Love to Ivy was something on a television commercial or in a movie. William was Billy's father--Jerry's brother--but William was gone now. He was almost 20 years older than her and he had been kind to her. He never beat her. He was good company. She missed him. Ivy had tried getting more education at the community college, but Billy came along and she'd decided to devote all her time and energy

to raising him. She had somebody to love now and he was all that mattered to her. She was almost glad that Billy was a boy and not a girl. Even though his life would be hard, it wouldn't be as hard as a black girl in Durham from a poor family. Restaurant work was all Ivy could find. She dreamed of getting a job in healthcare because she was good with people, but she had to raise Billy now. There just wasn't enough time.

She stood, waiting for the paint to dry on the banner. It seemed like she'd spent her whole life waiting on something--waiting for her first husband to kill her, waiting for William to die, waiting to find a better job. She knew Shorty would be upset that she was taking so much time on the banner and not tending the register. She could see him up front, cleaning tables. He kept looking back at her as he smiled at people and asked them how their barbecue tasted. She glanced down at the sign and Shorty suddenly appeared. He'd flanked her and he was holding two phones. Shorty always seemed to be holding two phones, taking orders, day and night. He looked just like his name--short and round. He was rounder than he was short. He hadn't missed too many meals. He wore his usual mix of local college teams--a Carolina Tarheels hat, a Duke tee-shirt, and a pair of triple extra-large orange Clemson Tigers warm-up pants he'd gotten from a fan who'd left them in the bathroom. He hurriedly wrote down an order while listening to one phone and handing the other phone to Ivy.

"For you."

Ivy shot him a look.

"Can you take a message? Got my hands full of paint."

Shorty shoved the phone back at her.

"Sounds kind of urgent. I got people waiting. I told you about personal calls at work, Ivy. You people don't listen to a word I say."

Ivy wiped her hands, grabbed the phone, and put it to her ear. She listened a few seconds then dropped the phone onto the sign that read: BEST BARBECUE IN CAROLINA AND THE US. She had started on the "A" in "USA" but didn't finish.

The Duke University Medical Center emergency room was the usual mel^ž of confusion of any large hospital, even though it had the reputation of being one of the great teaching hospitals in the world. Human suffering and misery were the same no matter where you were. It was all a blur to Ivy as she searched for Billy--white lights, voices, people running, doctors, nurses, strange sounds, cries, gurneys moving quickly past with accident victims. When she found Billy, he was in traction, immobilized. An ER team worked him over as they moved him from X-ray into an examining room. Ivy held his hand, tears streaming down her face. She stared down at her son, wiping her tears on her sleeve. Billy was conscious but not in much pain.

"I'm alright, Momma--"

Billy kept repeating the words, trying to reassure his mother. A doctor pulled Ivy aside.

"Mrs. Gotschall, John Pender. I'm a neurosurgeon. The MRI shows a fracture in the fourth cervical vertebrae."

Ivy's knees buckled. Dr. Pender took her arm and held it tight, steadying her. "It's hairline. He was lucky. It didn't compromise the spinal cord."

The mention of "spinal cord" froze Ivy. She closed her eyes in silent prayer.

"My baby gonna be alright?"

The doctor nodded.

"Your son's going to be fine."

Ivy cried out loud and hugged the doctor.

"Oh thank you, Lord."

She crumpled to her knees again. Dr. Pender pulled her into a waiting area. Ivy wouldn't let go of his arm. She couldn't. The doctor somehow seemed to be holding Billy in his hands. She wanted to keep holding tight onto this man who could perform miracles. Dr. Pender handed her a box of tissues then gently sat her down.

"We suspect there's a concussion, but we don't think it's severe. We'll need to keep him a couple days for observation."

The words flew right over Ivy's head. If she heard them, it didn't register. She was too busy praying and thanking God for the good news. Ivy stared across the hallway through the loose curtains and the sea of white coats that surrounded her son. Jerry entered the room. Ivy didn't notice him.

The next week dragged by for Ivy. The doctors kept delaying Billy's release, which was making her anxious. Maybe his injury was worse than they had told her. She stayed with Billy day and night and missed a lot of work. Jerry visited only once. He told Ivy that injuries were part of the game and dismissed it all as doctors being too careful, covering their asses. Dr. Pender told Ivy that Billy shouldn't play football for a year. A year? Why a year? Did they have some kind of test that said his brain would suddenly be alright after a year. Something didn't seem right to Ivy.

Ivy was running it all through her mind as she walked up Donohoe Street to her small white bungalow house which was in a rundown neighborhood of Durham called Everwood. She was wearing her Short Stuff's Barbecue uniform. She hadn't changed it since Billy had been injured. She thought it might bring bad luck. Everwood wasn't the worst part of Durham. It was the kind of

neighborhood that had seen better days. The houses were originally built as company tract homes for cotton mill workers. The mill workers kept the yards immaculate, but now the cotton mill was long gone and the yards were littered with bicycles and the occasional part of a car and other trash. It was a neighborhood where graduate students from Duke and Carolina lived. The graduate students had parties on the weekends, but their parties usually didn't get too out-of-hand like the undergrad parties in the neighborhoods closer to campus. Ivy liked living near the students. She felt safe with them around. She wanted Billy to be like them someday. A car backfired. She jumped and spun around as she walked onto the porch of her house and got her mail. Her mailbox was full of letters. She'd forgotten to take care of the mundane tasks. One letter in particular stood out. It had North Carolina State University written on the return address with the characteristic Wolfpack logo. Ivy opened the letter and scanned it. It was a short letter. It didn't take long to get to the point.

"...we are sorry to inform you that your football scholarship offer to North Carolina State University has been rescinded..."

She stopped reading before she reached the screen door. A tear rolled down her cheek then she burst out crying. She sat on the chair on the porch and watched the cars drive past. They carried mostly the college kids coming and going, nothing unusual, the ennui of a fall day in a college town. She could only think about Billy. She wanted him to be one of those kids. They seemed so carefree and alive, so full of potential. They all seemed to have a purpose in their lives. There was something about the way they talked and joked with each other. They seemed so free of the burdens of the world she lived in. She wanted that for Billy. But now he didn't have a college scholarship. Billy wasn't a good student. He barely passed some of his classes.

She didn't understand the letter. Why couldn't he still go to college even though he wasn't going to play football? It didn't make sense to her. Maybe there was a misunderstanding. She wiped something off her Short Stuff's uniform then got up and went into the house.

At Short Stuff's that night, Ivy worked on the fry machine. She was working the late shift because she'd missed work to be with Billy. The machine was dirty from not being cleaned in over a year. She had a distant look as she scoured the grease off the aluminum until it was shining. Her eyes were puffy. Shorty watched her. He walked up and stood near her, acting like he was looking for something on the shelf.

"How's Billy?"

Ivy wiped a tear away, trying not to let him see her face. She finally spoke.

"Coming home tomorrow."

Shorty nodded. He wanted to say something more, but he shuffled around, busying himself with a greasy cleaning rag. He buffed down a smudge of grease that Ivy had missed.

“If you need some time off or something, go ahead. I can give you some money if you need it. Until things get straightened out.”

He reached onto a shelf and pulled down some flyers and showed them to her.

“Hey, I got these made up. I used that sign you made for the slogan. Got to advertise.”

She looked at the flyers. The slogan read, “Best Barbecue in Carolina and the US,” just like Ivy's sign. She forced a smile.

“Can't make up my mind between 'US' and 'USA'. What do you think?”

Ivy shrugged.

“Maybe if we underline the 'US' part. Bring it out more. That'll work, don't you think?”

Ivy shrugged again and went back to her work, scrubbing the last of the grease off the fryer. Shorty watched her, wanting to say something to make her feel better.

“My boy had a good thing with basketball. We thought he was gonna play for Clemson but he busted his ankle. He went to college at North Carolina A&T and now he's working at Food Lion as a manager. He's doing just fine, making good money. Billy'll be alright. He'll figure it out.”

She smiled. Somebody up front called for Shorty.

The next day, Ivy stood in the hallway in the neurological ward of the Duke University Medical Center, staring out the window out a parking garage. She was thinking about everything that had happened, still trying to sort it all out in her mind. She knew that no matter what she did, Billy was going to try and play football again. She looked in on him. He was watching television, bored. Elisa, his girlfriend, and the cheerleaders had brought him balloons shaped like footballs. Their visit was short--they didn't seem that concerned. Maybe it was because they were just kids. They told Billy to get well soon because the coach wanted him to get back to practice. Jerry walked up. He seemed to be in his usual hurry as he glanced in quickly on Billy.

“Slick ready to go home? Coach was asking about him.”

Ivy spun around and looked him in the eyes. Jerry could tell something was on her mind.

“Billy ain't going to play football no more.”

Jerry shook his head.

“He'll be good as new in a week. They need him to win their first game against Dudley.”

“He ain't playing against Dudley. He ain't playing ever again.”

He pulled her down the hallway so Billy couldn't hear.

“Come on, Ivy. Who says?”

“I say.”

Jerry laughed.

“Football's his ticket. His way out.”

Ivy glared at him.

“Out of what? Just tell me what he's in that's so bad.”

Jerry took a deep breath. He spoke quietly.

“You know what I mean. It was my ticket. His daddy would be so proud of him. Football's all he ever wanted for Billy.”

She looked him up and down. A beer can peeked out of his pocket.

“Don't look like your ticket got you out of nowhere.”

Jerry took a breath and held his anger. He spoke in a low voice as nurses wheeled a patient down the hallway.

“I played for Carolina and Atlanta. I am somebody. You understand that, Ivy? I walk down the street and people call my name like I'm a movie star. That's what's going to happen for Billy. You can't stand in the way just because some doctors are trying to scare you.”

Ivy shook her head.

“They're keeping him another day.”

Ivy started walking back towards Billy's room. She called back to him over her shoulder.

“Sorry I got you over here. Appreciate you coming.”

Jerry cursed under his breath. then pulled out his phone and made a call.

At the Gotschall house the next afternoon, Jerry's SUV drove up. The doors opened and Jerry and Ivy got out and started to help Billy out of the car. Billy complained and resisted the whole way. Halfway up the sidewalk, he pushed them away.

“Leave me alone. Fuck-”

Ivy snapped at him, but he shook his head and stalked into the house alone, slamming the screen door. Moments later, the door to his room slammed shut from inside. Ivy and Jerry walked onto the porch. She slipped the N.C. State letter from behind a potted plant near the door and handed it to Jerry.

“Read it.”

Jerry quickly scanned the letter then laughed.

“Must be a mistake.”

“You haven’t been listening to me. Billy's not going to ever play football again. We got to tell him.”

Jerry thought a moment. He knew Ivy was upset. He figured all she needed was some time to settle down and all this would pass over.

“Let me work on it. I know a lot of people. Don't you worry now. Will you trust me? We'll get his scholarship back.”

She looked up through big tears. He wiped them away.

“They don't call me Jammer Jerr for nothing.”

He hugged her. She looked as if she wanted to say something, but nothing came out. She went into the house.

5. The List

Jerry drove around town, thinking about Billy and Ivy. He didn't have anywhere much to go or anything to do. He'd seen head injuries like Billy's a thousand times. Back when he was a kid, you just went home and watched television for a couple of days and took some aspirin. Jerry's car washes pretty much ran themselves. All he had to do was keep the bays clean and empty out the quarters and scare off the winos and dopers who liked to hang out. He was rich in quarters from the car washes. He'd lied to Ivy. There weren't any strings he could pull. All the people he once knew had moved on now--some were selling cars, some were selling refrigerators, some had disappeared, some were dead. He knew Billy's only chance was to get back playing football. Billy was just like Jerry. He wasn't a good student. Football was his ticket. Billy had a good chance of ending up like a lot of poor kids in Durham if Jerry didn't somehow get him back on track and playing football. At least that was Jerry's logic. Jerry pulled into a strip club called Jock's Sideline Bar.

Inside the bar, Jerry drank alone, aiming his thousand-yard stare at a slender dancer on stage. The dancer wore a football helmet, jersey and jockstrap. The daylight snuck in around the peeling black paint on the windows in bright dusty rays. When no one was watching, Jerry put a line of coke on his hand and bent his head down quickly, then snorted it under the table just as the waitress walked up. She gave him a look. It wasn't the first time.

"Anything else?"

He smiled up at her, being the charming Jerry.

I got the afternoon free. How about me and you--?"

She smiled, bored, a thousand miles away in her own world. Jerry threw down some bills, got up and left the bar. He got in his car and drove around town some more. He decided to head for one of his car washes and do some work and get his mind off things.

The Linebacker Car Wash on Holloway Street on the east side of Durham was Jerry's first carwash--the flagship of his twelve carwash empire. It was rundown and beat, but this place was his womb when he needed to be alone. He usually parked his car in the farthest bay from the street. The sign showed an image of Jerry wearing his Number 53 uniform making a tackle. Below the words THE LINEBACKER were smaller words, "Let Jammer Jerry Tackle That Dirty Car." Jerry had come up with the corny phrase. It sounded good at the time. Now he realized it was pretty lame but he didn't have the money to change it. A consulting firm had suggested he put in more automated equipment and call it "Linebacker Laser Wash." Jerry wasn't going to pump any more money into

the car washes. He wanted to sell the franchise and had tried a few times, but the buyers always backed out.

Tree branches littered the bays. Parabolic urine shadows marked the concrete walls like strange hieroglyphs from an ancient civilization. A late summer storm was moving off toward the east. Flashes of lightning lit up the blue-black sky. The temperature was cooler now, with almost a chill in the air, signaling that fall was on its way. The rain made the place look even more empty and abandoned. The only sign of life was Jerry who stood on a ladder, drinking a beer as he worked on the broken Linebacker sign, his phone glued to his ear as he listened to a voice shouting at him. Jerry finally responded to the voice on the phone.

"Told you I'd pay you next week--" He slammed the phone shut then got down from the ladder and flipped a switch to the sign. The sign lit up for a few moments, then sparked and fizzled out. He cursed and stared at the sign then finished off his beer with a long gulp. He threw the can into one of the bays where it clattered to a stop on top of a clogged drain. There was a noise from the sidewalk. A prostitute wearing a purple mini-skirt strolled up and stopped. She squinted up at the sign and then looked at Jerry. "That you on that sign?"

Jerry kept looking at the broken sign, ignoring her. The prostitute moved closer.

"You hear what I say, motherfucker? Don't look like you. Nary bit." Jerry finally looked at her. They locked eyes for a few seconds, then he motioned her toward his car. Twenty minutes later, Jerry sat low in the car, staring ahead with a strange look on his face. It wasn't the look he got when he went to his place--the place that 20,000 hits to his head was sending him. It was the other place he went to--a place that Jerry had been indulging in as much as he could lately: tail, ass, poontang, squish, cooter, trim, skank--any kind, any cost--it didn't matter. He just wanted to get his rocks off. Porn didn't work anymore. He needed the human touch. He tried to ignore the rhythmic sound of the prostitute working her trade and the quarters jingling in his pocket. He'd forgotten to take the coins out of his pants after cleaning out the machines. They were singing a song to him--clink, clunk, clank. It was an ugly song, a vulgar song now, a reminder to him that he was a long way from the NFL and the smooth, swishing sound of clean, rolled-up and perfumed hundred-dollar bills snorting lines of coke in fancy hotels and crisp cashiers' checks with lots of zeroes on them being handed over to pretty tellers in large downtown banks. It was a long way from the NFL to the Linebacker car wash in Durham, North Carolina. A very long way. But maybe, he had a connection back--Billy.

He closed his eyes as he neared orgasm, but the other place flashed in his mind. It was a playoff game and he was clotheslining a running back. The player turned a sickening flip and his helmet flew off as if he'd been decapitated. It was a cheap shot by any standards, but it was Jerry's job, what they'd hired him to do--to be an assassin. It was a lot like the hit Billy had taken from the

second-string linebacker. All the images were getting mashed up in his mind now, mingling with the metallic noise of the quarters in his pocket. He tried to concentrate, but another flood of images shot through his mind--a broken tooth stuck to a football helmet, broken bones, a finger lying in the dirt, a cleated leg, fans cheering, a lacerated eyeball, white bone sticking out of flesh, a player with a broken leg crying like a child. Jerry tried to push it out of his head and concentrate on the matter at hand. Those goddam quarters. He concentrated harder, closing his eyes, until he finally groaned with his climax, then arched his back as if he were making a hit on a player. The prostitute raised her head and wiped her mouth on her sleeve.

“Thirty.”

“You said twenty.”

He checked his wallet and pulled out a ten.

“All I got.” She snatched it and the bill vanished somewhere on her body. She grabbed the quarters off the floor then ran her hand through his pants, searching for more quarters. He sat back and started to laugh as she checked all his pockets. She reached up and checked his shirt pockets, talking to herself incoherently. She looked in her hand at the dozen or so quarters and counted them to herself. He laughed. “Get ‘em all?”

She stuck her middle finger in his face.

“You football players is some cheap-ass motherfuckers. Expect somebody to pay you to suck their dick.” She got out of the car, slammed the door and flipped him both fingers.

“Faggot--”

He laughed again then lurched back in the seat. His laugh grew louder, almost hysterical. He caught his reflection in the mirror. He had tears streaming down his face. He stopped laughing and thought about it. The strange behavior had started about a year ago. Laughing at odd times, crying at others. Sometimes he woke up in his sleep crying even though there was no bad dream he could remember. His phone rang. He knew it was probably Ivy. Her car had been in the shop for a couple weeks. She didn’t have the money to get it fixed. Jerry had offered to pay the bill, but she wouldn’t take his money. She probably wanted him to run some errand for her. He didn’t answer. He caught his reflection in the side mirror again. He stared at it a long while, almost as if he were transfixed by his own face. He was still handsome, maybe more so than when he was younger. His features were more rugged and chiseled. He was the American dream who had peaked somehow, somewhere, sometime, someplace--when nobody was paying attention because everybody was having too much fun. It all happened as an envious world changed all around the great white egg--the promised land,

the great idea--America. He was part of a dream that flashed in the pan and had now started to go fetid.

A black SUV slid up in front of him, pulling Jerry out of his place. A fat man eating a greasy barbecue sandwich from Short Stuff's Barbecue was sitting behind the wheel. His name was Bubba. He rolled down his window and smiled at Jerry. He looked like a redneck version of Che Guevara.

"There he be--Jammer Jerr."

Jerry stared at Bubba. He knew what he wanted.

"I don't have it."

"Just when do you think you will have the money for the boss man? He gets worried. And when the boss man gets worried, Bubba gets worried. Know what I mean, Jerr?"

Bubba got out of his car, walked over slowly and held out the half-eaten barbecue sandwich to Jerry. Jerry shook his head. Bubba held up the Short Stuff's bag which had Ivy's slogan on it.

"Best barbecue in Carolina and the US. Shouldn't it be USA? Awful good. Just the right amount of slaw. Not too much, not too little. Know what I mean, Jerr?"

Bubba laid the sandwich on the hood of Jerry's car then pulled out a Beretta 9mm pistol from a shoulder holster. He unlocked the safety and looked around to make sure nobody was looking. He aimed at the Linebacker Car Wash sign.

BLAM. BLAM. BLAM. BLAM. BLAM. BLAM.

The bullets shattered the sign, dropping a shower of plastic and glass onto the parking lot. Bubba handed the Beretta to Jerry and smiled. The pistol grip was hot and greasy in his hand.

"Believe your sign needs fixin' there, Jerr. One left in the chamber if you want to see if you can fix it."

Jerry held the gun limply in his hand then raised it. He pointed it at Bubba. Bubba held up his hands and laughed mockingly. Jerry kept the gun on him. Bubba didn't seem worried about staring down the barrel of the Baretta.

"Your sister-in-law works at Short Stuff's, don't she?"

Jerry stared at him.

"That boy of hers is a good ball player. Billy. Except I heard he was on 'the list.'"

Jerry thought a moment. Bubba rarely had much to say unless it was about the money Jerry owed him.

"What fuckin' list?"

Bubba took a big bite of the barbecue sandwich, taking a piece of the wrapper into his mouth. The sandwich disappeared. He balled up the wrapper then held it out to Jerry.

“Don’t tell me you ain’t heard about the list. They keep a list of players with busted heads now.”

“Who?”

Bubba laughed.

“Who? Don’t matter who, Jerr. Bookies, coaches, scouts. Everybody’s got a copy of the list. Once you get on the list, you’re done. List starts in grade school nowadays.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Where you been, Jerr? Football’s different than when you played. Before long, they’ll be rent-a-players. Won’t be no such thing as real football. It’ll be touch football, fake, wrestling, pussyball, lingerie football. Women’ll be playing it. Fuck, I’d watch that, all that tits and ass running around on the field. How about you, Jerr? Bet you’d like to be chasing all that ass around out there.”

Jerry stared at him, still holding the gun on him.

“You know, back in ancient Rome, the generals would kill the messenger if he brought bad news. I’m just the messenger, Jerr. That’s all. If I go away, another one’s coming right behind me.”

Bubba grabbed the Beretta with a quick motion and looked around the car wash.

“You need to clean this place up, Jerr. Nothin’ worse than a dirty car wash. How you gonna attract any decent customers?”

Bubba put the gun to Jerry’s forehead and pulled back the hammer. He smiled at Jerry. Jerry started to laugh again. It was a weird laugh--almost like he was laughing and crying at the same time.

“What the fuck you laughing about?”

Jerry kept laughing. Bubba pulled the trigger.

Click. Bubba grinned and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

“Ain’t you glad I can count good?”

Jerry continued to laugh. Bubba backed away.

“You are one weird-ass motherfucker. You better go see a goddam head shrinker.”

He got in his car and looked back at Jerry who now had tears running down his face. Bubba shook his head and peeled out.

At the Hillside High School football field, the players scrimmaged in the heat of the early fall. Elisa and the cheerleaders were practicing some country line dance moves that they were trying to incorporate into their routine. Cheerleading was plug-and-play. It didn’t really matter who was playing on the team or what the game was. Most of the cheerleaders had already forgotten their star

quarterback, number 5, Billy Gotschall. Coach Sauerbeck kept a close eye on the new first-string quarterback, number 17, Terry Mustain, as he headed out of the locker room. He wasn't anywhere near as good as Billy, but he would do. An assistant coach motioned to Coach Sauerbeck and pointed his gaze toward the trainers. Ivy was standing near them, wearing her Shorty Stuff's uniform. The coach watched her a moment then spit a long string and barked "Shit." to the assistant coach.

In his cool office, Coach Sauerbeck shuffled papers nervously as Ivy took her seat. Formalities weren't necessary. He knew what she wanted. And she knew he knew. She held out the letter from the N.C. State admissions office as she sat down. He took it and smiled. He didn't have to read it. He knew exactly what it said, but he acted like he was reading it to make her feel like he cared. He even put on his reading glasses and made sure to take an extra minute and nod his head a few times as he performed his act. All coaches got better at acting the longer they stayed on as coaches. The bigger the job, the bigger the act. He beamed a broad smile up at Ivy.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Gotschall. These things happen."

Ivy kept her eyes steady on him.

"Billy can still go to college, can't he?"

"Sure, but he had a football scholarship to State, Mrs. Gotschall."

Ivy seemed confused.

"You mean he can't go to college unless he plays football?"

The coach leaned forward and shuffled more papers. He didn't know how to tell her the simple truth that Billy wasn't going to N.C. State because all they wanted was for him to play football for them. If he couldn't play football for them, he wasn't ever stepping foot on campus. The coach was passing the buck.

"You'll have to talk to them. The admissions office at State. I can't help you with that."

Ivy crossed her arms, almost as if she were accusing him of something.

"How'd they find out about all this?"

He took his sweaty cap off and scratched his head.

"Mrs. Gotschall, I'd try and straighten it out with them. I'm just a high school football coach. Talk to Billy's doctor. Maybe he can tell you something. Anything else I can do for you?"

Ivy shook her head as she stood. He handed her the letter. She thanked him and walked out. Coach Sauerbeck looked out his window and watched her slowly head toward a bus stop in the distance. He considered giving her a ride in his car but shook his head as he thought about it.

“Shit.”

Ivy caught the Durham DATA bus from the high school and rode it down Roxboro Street over to Duke University Medical Center. It took her some time, but she finally tracked down Dr. Pender in the commissary. Ivy and Dr. Pender sat at a table. Medical students in bright white lab coats walked past quickly. Dr. Pender sipped coffee and kept an eye on his messages as they slid past on his phone. Ivy couldn't help but watch the students. They looked so clean, so smart, like they knew the answers to all the problems of the world. And if they didn't know the answers now, some day they would. They were trying to help people. A thought kept going through her mind. Why couldn't Billy be like them, with their thirst for knowledge? They seemed to want to do something good with their lives, to help people, to leave the world a better place, to make sacrifices. Why did Billy have to make his way in life getting beaten up and hurt playing football? They knew something, a secret perhaps, that she wished she could've told her son long ago, only if she knew what that secret was. Nobody ever winked at her and gave her any idea about it. But now, at least she was getting a glimpse of it. She thought about the difference between Billy and them. Maybe the world would be a better place without football. Football hurt people. Dr. Pender touched Ivy's hand. She'd been daydreaming.

“Mrs. Gotschall, your son fractured a cervical vertebra. He was lucky. He'll recover fully from that injury. The problem is with his brain. The MRI showed there could be a lasting injury. It may never manifest itself, or it may show up tomorrow. In my opinion, he'll probably be fine if he doesn't re-injure himself.”

Ivy stared a hole in the doctor, making him a little uncomfortable. It was almost as if she were daring him to take his eyes off her and look at his phone. “I don't understand. One minute you say Billy's perfectly fine and the next you act like something terrible might happen.”

“Football players are at special risk. As they get older, they can develop brain dysfunction from repeated blows to the head. With some of them, it can be severe. We're just starting to learn more about it.”

“Just starting?”

He smiled.

“It's a controversial subject.”

Ivy shook her head, not understanding.

“We're talking about my boy's health. How is that controversial?”

“There's a lot we just don't know right now.”

Ivy pondered the words then she seemed to understand.

“You mean it's about money. That what you're telling me? What's money got to do with my baby's health?”

He mustered a smile.

“It's complicated.”

His phone lit up and he quickly checked the messages.

“I'm sorry. I've got an urgent call. Try online. There's a lot of information there that might help you.”

He got up and started to walk away. She grabbed his arm and held out the letter from State.

“What about the college? They sent me a letter. How'd they find out so quick?”

He barely glanced at it.

“I'm just a physician, Mrs. Gotschall. I'm sorry.”

He walked away, disappearing into the sea of white coats. Ivy looked around at all smart doctors and medical students, the brightest people in medical science. They didn't seem to be her allies now. They seemed to be part of something that was against her.

At the Gotschall house that afternoon, Billy and Elisa sat on the couch, watching television and hugging. Billy didn't seem to be in the mood for much of anything.

“You better go before momma gets home.”

Elisa seemed to have something on her mind.

“You alright, Billy?”

Billy puffed himself up.

“Alright? Look at me. Do I look alright?”

“People talk. Some of the players are saying you'll never play again.” “They're just jealous because I got a full scholarship to State. Any of them got a scholarship? Hell no. They're all a bunch of chumps.”

He hugged her then tried to kiss her, but she pushed away. A car horn beeped outside. She stood up.

“I got to go. Bye.”

Billy grabbed for her, but she ran out. He reached around and pulled the curtain back to see her get in a car with two cheerleader friends. They kept looking back at the house. Billy grabbed a football off the floor and walked back into his room and fell on the bed. He listened at the window. He could hear the girls giggling and laughing as the car drove off down the street.

6. Research

That night, Ivy tossed in bed, thinking about the letter and Dr. Pender and how something didn't seem right about the whole thing. She still couldn't tell Billy that his scholarship to State had been taken away. The next day at work, Ivy was dead tired. She couldn't concentrate on her work. On her lunch break, she told Shorty she needed to check on Billy and she might be late getting back. Shorty was his usual annoyed self, but he shrugged and told her to go ahead.

Ivy took the DATA bus to downtown Durham and got off on Roxboro Street at Third. It was raining and she didn't have anything to cover her head. It was a short walk to the library. She rarely went there. She used to take Billy when he was a boy to listen to recordings and get books and videos. As she entered, she shook the water off her hair and clothes and looked into the children's area and remembered back to when she'd sit with Billy as he looked through the Elmo books. He loved Elmo. She'd read him every Elmo book in the library. Billy's room at the house still had a couple of faded Elmo stickers on the wall. She asked the librarian if she could use the computers to search the internet. The librarian gave her a password and showed her to a bank of computers that sat in a circle near the periodicals. Ivy didn't know much about searching and the librarian helped her open Google and type in the words she wanted to search on. Ivy typed in "football head injuries."

Dozens of articles came up on the screen, mostly related to head and neck injuries, concussions, and other trauma. She clicked through them and studied the information. It was hard to understand all the medical words: repetitive head injuries, visual motor and motor cortex function abnormalities, chronic traumatic encephalopathy, traumatic brain injury, Tau-immunoreactive neurofibrillary tangles, fronto-temporal lobar degenerations, biomarkers, rotational acceleration, closed-head flexion trauma, risks factor for dementia. She read about something called SIS--Second-impact syndrome--which occurred when a player sustained a second head injury before the symptoms from the first head injury had resolved. It wasn't as medical-sounding as the other articles. She could understand most of the words. SIS seemed to be common in football players who were constantly being hit in the head during a game, especially linemen, linebackers and running backs. The heat of battle kept them playing when they should've been removed from the game. She read about other injuries and syndromes, all of which were full of acronyms: MBI, MTBI, MHI. One study indicated that nearly a third of retired players would develop long-term cognitive problems and that the conditions were likely to emerge at younger ages than in the general population. She saw terms like "cumulative risk" and long passages that seemed too scientific for her: "Traumatic brain

injury leads to the accumulation of several neurodegeneration-related proteins, including synuclein, ubiquitin, progranulin, TAR DNA-binding protein 43, amyloid precursor protein, and its metabolite.”

Although she could barely understand the medical terminology, she knew it didn't sound good. The information went on and on. She sat at the computer, thinking to herself. Why didn't anyone ever tell her about this before her son started playing football? Did the NFL know about all of this? The colleges? They had to know. They weren't stupid. Sure, there were the jokes that football players were dumb from getting hit in the head all the time, but now Ivy was realizing it wasn't a joke. It was real and it had real effects on the lives of the players. It all seemed so well-documented but at the same time, nobody seemed to know or care about it. The kids kept playing football like nothing was wrong. Every Saturday and Sunday there were dozens of games on television, all sponsored by the biggest companies in America. Did those companies know about all this? For all their advertisements about how much they cared about people and all the other feel-good stuff they proclaimed, did they know what football was doing to the players? They had to know. And Jerry--his behavior seemed to be getting worse. He was always a little crazy but something was different now. Did playing football do that to him? She didn't want to think about Jerry now. One thing was clear to her. There had been a lot of studies on football head injuries, and it looked like it was well known by medical science. And, it seemed like it wasn't anything new. Some of the articles went back to the sixties. If the NFL knew about this all these years, didn't that make them part of something--a conspiracy? She remembered back when she was called for jury duty. The defendant was being tried for first-degree murder because the district attorney said it was a pre-meditated act. The district attorney made it a point to define “pre-meditated” for the jurors, saying to them that the defendant had planned the murder, or at least had prior knowledge and intent for his actions. In other words, the murder was not a spontaneous act of passion. She thought about the NFL. They knew about football head injuries and all the studies for many years. They had prior knowledge, yet they kept holding out the carrot for young boys to try and be football stars. She thought about N.C. State. It was the same with them. But worse, they were a university, a place where knowledge and truth were supposed to be held up to the light. A place where students should be safe. Football players were not safe. She sat there, getting angrier the more she turned it over in her mind. Then she thought about Dr. Pender at Duke University Medical Center. He had barely told her anything about Billy's condition compared to all of the information she'd just found. But the more she thought about it, the more she realized he probably wouldn't have told her much of anything. It had been the same when her husband was ill. They treated her like she was incapable of understanding. She didn't like it. Doctors treated her the same way they treated all poor and uneducated people. The doctors didn't

tell you anything. Maybe they didn't know. Maybe it didn't matter. Maybe what would happen would happen. This time she wanted to know more. Billy was her only child. She was tired of it.

Her mind was wandering again. She stood up and said "No!" loudly to herself. A man sitting across from her shook his head at her, perplexed. She decided at that moment that she wasn't going to put up with it--any of it. No more lies, no matter who they came from--the high school coaches, the colleges, Jerry, the National Football League. Billy was her child to protect. She was going to do everything she could to find out more. She looked at the clock on the wall. It was 2:15 and she was late for work. She'd taken an extra forty-five minutes and Shorty would be mad. There was a game tonight and there would be a lot of call-in orders at Short Stuff's. As she gathered her things, she saw a Duke University football schedule on the bulletin board above the computers. Another thought shot through her mind. If the doctors at Duke knew all this information about football head injuries, why did they let it go on? They were supposed to be healers, to help people, to cure disease, to prevent illness, to protect people. Where were they in all this? Duke was a great university with a world-class hospital, a place for knowledge and reason. It held all the great ideas and thoughts of mankind. Certainly all those doctors had to know what she had just typed into a computer in the Durham library. She was just a poor, uneducated woman. If she knew, they had to know. The colleges had to know. The coaches had to know. The NFL had to know. And if they all knew it all this time, what did that say about the whole system. Was it just about the money? Was it okay to use a certain type of people for sports, for entertainment, and then just throw them away? How would doctors like it if somebody banged on their heads before doing surgery? She didn't understand it--but in a way, she did understand it. She was poor and she was black. She was used to being set aside, not listened to, tricked. She looked outside and shook herself back to reality. It was raining hard now and it was five minutes later than the last time she looked. Shorty would be waiting for her when she walked in the restaurant. She thanked the librarian and glanced outside. Her bus was driving past. She pulled her scarf over her head and darted out into the downpour. She ran for the bus but it lumbered away in the rain, leaving her alone and soaking wet. She stood there a moment then something caught her eye. A car. It looked like Jerry's car. It was parked outside a bar called "The Pussycat." A faded cat with big eyes and huge whiskers was scratchily drawn on the brick wall outside the bar. She walked toward it. Inside the bar, Jerry sat alone in the darkness, drinking a beer and watching a football game on television. Ivy entered, letting her eyes adjust to the dim light. She shook off the water then saw Jerry.

"Seen your car outside."

Jerry laughed and made a motion for her to sit down.

"Welcome to my office."

"I need you to take me down to the college."

"What college?"

"N.C. State."

He took a long pull off his beer. Ivy stared at him.

"I'm waiting for a business associate right now. Can it wait?"

"You know I don't have a car. I'm just asking you a favor. This what you do all day long?"

She glanced at a couple of women who looked like prostitutes, then she headed toward the door. Jerry muttered under his breath and called to her.

"Okay--"

7. Sports Machine

Ivy sat silently in Jerry's car as he drove slowly through traffic in downtown Raleigh, toward North Carolina State University. It was still raining and windy from a nor'easter that had blown up the east coast. Ivy didn't care that Shorty might fire her. She had something important to do. She clutched the letter from N.C. State in her hand. Trash blew around on the streets. A stoplight hung low across the intersection, blinking its slow yellow flashes of caution as cars jerked and prodded each other, trying to get through the gridlock. The sky looked like it was angry at the clouds, which moved quickly past in grayish, constantly changing shapes. They finally made it past the intersection then pulled up to another blinking stoplight. Jerry was angry with the traffic but angrier with her. She finally looked at him.

"That doctor at Duke said a lot of football players get hurt."

Jerry stared ahead, waiting for the light to change.

"Part of the game--"

"No, I mean hurt, in their heads."

Jerry laughed.

"Doctor's right. Gotta be crazy in the head to play football. Practice all day long in the hot sun, put up with crazy coaches."

He laughed. Ivy shook her head.

"You ain't listening to me. I'm talking about their brains. People that play football--their brains get messed up."

The light changed to green. Jerry stared ahead. Maybe he was at his place again. Ivy looked over at him.

“Light's green--”

A car honked behind them. Ivy grabbed his arm.

“Jerry--”

Jerry floored the gas pedal, jerking Ivy's head back. The wheels spun on the wet pavement, making the car fishtail sideways. The glove box flung open. A .38 revolver dropped out between Ivy's feet. It was the same color as the angry sky. She stared at it for what seemed an eternity, then reached down and slowly picked up the gun, holding it with two fingers. Jerry grabbed it from her.

“I keep it because of the car washes. Always got a lot of cash on me. Ain't loaded.”

He opened the cylinder and spun it quickly to prove it was empty of bullets. She was scared of the gun, maybe of him, at least right now. He threw the gun back in the glove box, then laughed at the look on her face.

“What--?”

Ivy stiffened and watched the cars in front of her. She was afraid to look at him. His posture was rigid, he seemed frightening, like something had taken over his body. He turned the wheel quickly at a sign for North Carolina State University. The tires squealed as they made the turn. As they drove through the campus, Ivy kept her eyes on the football stadium. It loomed in the background like a giant insect spreading out over the campus, looking as if it were about to devour all the buildings around it. Jerry stopped the car near the field house. Ivy got out slowly and shut the door gently. The rain had let up, leaving the air misty and thick.

“Thank you for driving me.”

He rolled down the passenger window and leaned out. He looked like he wanted to apologize.

“I'm sorry about the gun. Okay?”

She stared at him.

He put the car in park as if he were going to get out.

“Want me to come in with you? I think I know the athletic director.”

Ivy shook her head.

“Give me about an hour.”

She walked on. Jerry settled back in the seat and watched her as she mingled into the students then disappeared. He watched the kids as they made their way to class. His mind started to go back to his days in college at Chapel Hill, barely 25 miles away. The University of North Carolina at

Chapel Hill was North Carolina's jewel in the crown of its university system. Carolina was N.C. State's cross-town rival. Duke University, which sat five miles away from Carolina in Durham, rounded out the trifecta of a college triangle that was made in sports heaven.

On his first day of college at Carolina, Jerry and the other football players had been led into a large room in the field house. It was called the Athletic Academic Resource Center. A petite, pretty woman with a thick southern drawl named Leigh Anne Underwood instructed them that since they were athletes, they might want to pick a major that was more suited to their busy schedules. Ms. Underwood held their attention like a snake charmer. She was a southern belle with bright blue eyes, dark hair bobbed at the shoulders, and alabaster skin. She grasped a huge piece of chalk, fondled it lovingly in her delicate hands, then turned and wrote on the board, spelling in big letters the majors the players might want to consider during their time at the University of North Carolina: Physical Education, Health Studies, Personal Communication. A huge lineman named Roy Betterton turned around and whispered to the other players, "What about Basket Weaving?"

Everyone chuckled. It was the usual joke about dumb football players. Ms. Underwood heard this and she whirled around and looked Roy Betterton in the eyes. She smiled sweetly at him. He was a 320-pound white kid, a star offensive lineman from the sandhills of eastern North Carolina. His nickname from that moment on would be "Basket." Everybody on the team had a nickname. Even the coaches had nicknames, although the players usually refrained from letting the coaches in on the secret. Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood beamed a smile at Jerry and the other players.

"Basket weaving is not a major, but we do offer courses in textiles and ceramics and other industrial arts if you're interested, Mr. Betterton."

Everyone broke out laughing, amazed that she knew his name. The "Basket" nickname started to percolate throughout the room among the players in low husky chuckles. That's how nicknames worked in football. You do something unusual or stupid or maybe even something great, and that's the nickname you're stuck with forever. Most of the nicknames were for unusual or stupid things: "Karo" for a coach yelling at a lineman in a 100-degree heat practice that you move like Karo syrup. "Plug" for an offensive coach praising a guard who's squatting down like a fireplug, pushing back half the defensive line. "Coleslaw" for a running back who fumbles the ball on every other play because the coach says he's thinking about his girlfriend's twat which, according to an overheard conversation in the shower, is as sweet as North Carolina coleslaw.

Fortunately for Jerry, he'd done something almost great to earn his moniker--he could jam-up the offensive line so fast that running backs didn't know which holes to run in. It was as if he had a doppelganger. Number 53 could be in two places at once. Teams had to come up with new offensive

strategies when Jammer Jerr was playing. It got him into Carolina and then the NFL, the fraternity of fraternities, the wet dream of every 12-year-oldboy in America.

A campus cop tapped on Jerry's window, bringing him out of his place.

"Can't park here--"

Jerry nodded and cranked the car. He drove around campus until he found a lot with an empty space. He pulled in and settled back in his seat.

Ivy walked down the huge hallway of the Murphy Center which was North Carolina State's main athletic facility. The walls were filled with all the N.C. State sports greats. The trophies and awards seemed to go on forever. She felt small in the huge hallway. The echo of her shoes on the waxed floor made her feel even smaller and insignificant. She stopped and looked at a whole section of photos and trophies dedicated to the N.C. State football greats. The athletic director, Henry Crutchfield, walked out of his office and approached Ivy with a big smile and outstretched hand.

"Welcome, Mrs. Gotschall. Glad I could work you in today. Please, let's go into my office."

Inside his office, Ivy tried to get comfortable in the huge leather chair that was used to impress prospects, but for some reason she couldn't stop moving around. She was squirming like a child in a church pew. Mr. Crutchfield looked through Billy's file. Something made him smile.

"So you're Jerry Gotschall's sister-in-law. I remember Jerry. He was a great linebacker for Atlanta. He went to Carolina, but I think we can cut him some slack on that. How's he doing? Doesn't he own some car washes around the area--The Lineman?"

She nodded. She didn't bother telling him the name was "The Linebacker." He pulled out another piece of paper. A solemn look came across his face as he studied it.

"About your son, Billy. We deeply regret the circumstances."

The words sounded contrived to her. She moved forward in the chair.

"Billy wants to come here to college."

"Wonderful. We'd love to have him at State."

"Can he start next fall?"

"Well, it's not that simple, Mrs. Gotschall. You see your son's acceptance to State was contingent on him playing football for us."

"Contingent?"

"Your son had a scholarship to play football. Now since that won't be possible, he'll have to be admitted in the usual fashion."

She arched her brow.

“What fashion is that?”

“He'll need to send in a standard application, just like everyone else.”

She still didn't understand.

“I thought he was already accepted to college here.”

Mr. Crutchfield nodded and smiled.

“He was, as a football player. But now, the situation has changed. Perhaps you'd like to talk to someone from admissions. I'll give them a call and tell them you're coming over. It's in Holladay Hall. I'd be happy to walk you over.”

He picked up his phone. She wriggled out of the big chair and stood up.

“You've told me all I need to know.”

He stood up as if he were going to head her off at the door.

“I'm sure they can get your son moving in the right direction. I can pull a few strings and maybe get him in at the top of the waiting list.”

“Thank you.”

She walked out. He called to her but she didn't bother to look back.

Jerry sat in the car watching the students, daydreaming again. His mind had jumped back to where he'd left off with Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood. He was back in college now--back at UNC Chapel Hill--the place where the sky was always Carolina blue. At UNC, Jerry went to class less than half the time. He could get a waiver anytime he needed and with the help of Ms. Underwood, take his exams late, usually at his dorm or anywhere he chose. This of course meant that he didn't actually take the exams. Ms. Underwood had a group of tutors who took the exams for Jerry and the other players. One of the tutors was a teaching assistant in the Department of Women's and Gender Studies. She helped teach a course on Feminism at both Carolina and Duke called “Leadership in Violence Prevention for Educators.” The tutors wrote the papers for the players. It was not uncommon for the tutors and the players to become involved sexually--not so much romantically--after all, the tutors had a lot of players to “service.” The female tutors were affectionately referred to by the players as “heads of the class.”

Jerry remembered hearing that even the more upscale schools like Duke made *allowances* for its student athletes. Duke, the Harvard of the South, had its courses for athletes--Analysis of Human Movement, Beginning Improvising, Beyond Stereotype Threat, Social Dances of North America, Interpersonal Relations, The Urban Underclass, Physicians and Human Rights, Human Computer Interaction, Sleep and Dreams, Air Pollution, Swahili. Jerry had enrolled in a Swahili course at UNC.

He went to only one Swahili class where he'd learned three words: Hello, Goodbye and Motherfucker--*Hodi, Godo*, and *Kuma Nina*. That's all the Swahili he ever learned. He got an A in the course. He hadn't put two-and-two together back then, but when he got to the NFL and found out that other black players had taken courses in Swahili, he realized it was a racist thing for colleges to do. On the surface, it was just another trick colleges used to perpetuate the myth that the athletes were actually getting an education. After all, a course in Swahili sounded like a real college course, not too unlike a course in Latin or German. In reality, this myth reeked of racism, almost as if some cracker administrator had snuck it in as a joke and it had somehow percolated its way around to other colleges. Everyone in Jerry's Swahili class was a black athlete except for big Roy Betterton, who took it because he heard it was the easiest class on campus. Ms. Underwood had guided him in that decision.

A smile spread across Jerry's face as a pretty young woman who looked a lot like Ms. Underwood stood in front of his car, waiting for traffic. From the back, she was Ms. Underwood, with her tight dress and heels that made her calves pump out like a tight-end getting in his reps on the calf machine. Jerry's smile was now radiating so wide that a casual observer would think he was doing something illegal.

"Kuma Nina," he said to himself.

This wasn't the derogatory motherfucker. This was the exclamatory motherfucker. He was thinking about Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood. He repeated the words to himself as he watched the woman. The sight of her sent his mind back to another time at Chapel Hill. It was one cold-ass January night in the parking lot of the Freewill Baptist Church of Deliverance and Fire Salvation which sat just to the north of the UNC planetarium. Jerry and Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood and the feminist teaching assistant were all piled into the backseat of Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood's Nissan Sentra, complete with broken tail light and a temperature gauge that always stayed just below the H.

He remembered a sign on the marquee of the church that read "Praise God Anyhow." He thought about that expression every time he thought about Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood. Was he being rewarded or punished for his sins? It was unclear to him.

Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood's middle initial should've been "H" for hot, just like the Nissan Sentra. Her redneck daddy back in Gaffney, South Carolina, who ran a used car lot surely would've shot the three of them dead if he knew what she and Jerry and the feminist teaching assistant did in Chapel Hill on that frigid night. Jerry imagined the poor bastard bragging that his daughter was a special assistant to the University of North Carolina football team. Special assistant indeed. Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood and her feminist friend had certainly come up with a special treat for Number 53 on that particular night in Chapel Hill, and for two nights afterwards. Those other two

nights involved a Motel 6 that had just been constructed near Interstate 40 on the northern outskirts of Chapel Hill. The paint wasn't even dry on the walls and the bed was just a mattress on the floor with no box springs. The mattress was still wrapped in plastic. That wasn't the last time that Jerry Motel 6'd it with Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood and her friend. In fact, they all became quite popular with the clerk at that Motel 6. His name was Bubba--the same Bubba that Jerry was now dealing with and indebted to in the neighborhood of two million dollars. He was Jerry's bookie and drug dealer all rolled into one fat, greasy, barbecue-eating redneck. Bubba had moved up in the ranks of the sports and dope underworld in the Raleigh-Durham area. His connections ranged from northern Florida to New Jersey now. He had associates in Washington D.C, Virginia Beach, Jacksonville, and even Atlantic City. Bubba was Jerry's first connection to the sports underworld, which was supposedly centered somewhere on the east coast just north of Atlantic City--nobody knew the exact location. At the University of North Carolina, Bubba got Jerry dope for free. All Jerry had to do was let Bubba watch from a little hole he'd drilled in the wall behind the manager's office in the Motel 6. This was before Google figured it all out and sent the online porn business into the stratosphere. Bubba got a good show. Jerry got free dope. The girls got whatever it is they got out of it, even if it was just relief from the boredom of their mundane and lonely lives in university towns. Their days of being able to snag fraternity boys were long gone, unless they went in the back door of the frats at three in the morning after the parties were over.

Bubba even brought them room service--Bubba style. Barbecue ribs from a local joint a quarter mile south of the Motel 6 on Highway 86. The joint was right beside an Exxon station that sold rubbers and French ticklers and other sexual sundries in the bathroom. All you needed was a handful of quarters. A lot of gas stations in rural North Carolina seemed to have these travelers aid items for all the Motel 6'ing going on beside the interstate. Even though the barbecue joint was just a shack, it was some of the best barbecue in the Raleigh-Durham area. On game days, the exit on Interstate 40 would be backed up a mile as people tried to get ribs for their tailgate parties. In a bit of serendipity, the cook was Shorty, Ivy's boss and owner of Short Stuff's restaurant. Jerry remembered a Bruce Springsteen song on a hodge-podge tape that one of the girls had made. The tape played over and over as Jerry and the women screwed in various positions and configurations that would need an updated edition of the *Kama Sutra* to describe. The tape only had one song on it, in various versions, some bootlegged. It was called "Spirit in the Night." The song had a lot of wailing saxophone by Clarence Clemons, the big man as they called him, the true soul of the Springsteen's E-Street Band. Something about the barbecue and Clarence's sad and dissonant saxophone cries seemed to do something strange to the women. That was fine with Jerry. He was a

football player. He was a performer. He had the energy that shot through him whenever he needed it, all day and all night long.

A car horn brought Jerry out of his Chapel Hill dream and back to his car parked in the lot at N.C. State. Ms. Leigh Anne Underwood disappeared into the ether of his brain, replaced by an undergrad with too many books, trying to balance a computer and a drink from Starbucks. Jerry watched the students. He was jealous of them. He wondered what it would be like to actually go to college and study and learn something that was valuable, instead of being paraded around and made to perform like a circus animal. The thought lingered in his mind, but not for long. He looked at himself in the mirror. Tears were streaming down his face. There was no emotion to it, just water gushing out of his eyes. He found some tissues and wiped his face. He looked at the clock. Ivy had been gone two hours. He needed to find her and get back to Durham.

Ivy couldn't find Jerry's car so she had walked around the N.C. State campus. She wasn't worried about Shorty and whether he was going to fire her for missing work again. And she didn't care if she caught up with Jerry. He was starting to scare her now. He used to be happier, but now he seemed like something was burrowing into his skin. She walked through The Brickyard and past the Memorial Tower and the Talley Student Center. Every college campus had the same sorts of places--buildings and corners and alleys and squares and statues with the usual folklore--just the names changed. She lost track of time and Jerry as she thought about her son and his future. The buildings on the campus looked so large and indifferent to her, like they didn't care, yet at the same time she knew they held so much knowledge. And somehow she felt betrayed by all that knowledge, betrayed by everything on the N.C. State campus. It all seemed to be against her.

She finally made it to Holladay Hall which was the N.C. State administration building. It was not an imposing building. It seemed to have been built in a different time than most of the other buildings on campus--an earlier time--a time when her people would not be allowed near the campus except as janitors or laborers or cafeteria workers. She thought about her mother. She had worked in one of the cafeterias at Duke all her life. And now Ivy was doing almost the same thing, working at a barbecue restaurant serving the same people--students and professors. She felt out of place in the hurry of the college kids. They all seemed to be moving so quickly to get to the next class, to get to knowledge, to get somewhere besides where they were. Something burned inside them. A thirst. Ivy felt like time had stood still in her life. There had been no reason to hurry to anything. There was nothing that needed to be learned. No thirst, nothing. Until now. There was something she had to know about--something she had to learn--something she needed to tell other people--if they'd listen. Nearby, she saw a statue of N.C. State's team mascot, the Wolfpack. It showed three wolves standing on a rock. One wolf was howling as if to give warning to any other wolves that might be in the area.

The other two wolves seemed vigilant, guarding the den or perhaps searching for something. Perhaps it was knowledge and truth they were searching for. Jerry drove up, talking on his phone. He opened her door from his side.

“Been looking all over for you. I gotta get back. How'd it go?”

She shook her head. He leaned his head outside the passenger door. Ivy was still looking at the wolves.

“I'll find my way home.”

Jerry jumped out of the car. He touched her arm, but she pulled away from him and turned back to look at the wolves. She seemed particularly interested in the one on top, the one that seemed to be howling the loudest. It was a mother wolf.

“Get in the car, Ivy.”

She took one final look at the wolves then walked on and disappeared into the students.

8. Protest

Billy and Ivy ate dinner silently at the kitchen room table. Billy twirled his spaghetti on his fork, not really interested in the food. Ivy watched him then reached over and grabbed his hand.

“Where'd you go today?”

Billy chewed slowly as he formulated an answer.

“Nowhere.”

Ivy didn't believe it. Billy moved his food around on his plate with his fork.

“I found the letter from State. Why'd you hide it from me?”

Ivy thought about it. She didn't have an answer.

“You're getting back in college somehow. I'm doing something about it.”

Billy sat back and shook his head.

“Ain't nothin' to do. Only chance I got is football. I was gonna buy you a big house in Raleigh with a four car garage and a swimming pool and an exercise room. All the fancy clothes you want--a guest house--everything. Couple of Mercedes-Benz's, maybe even a Ferrari.”

“Ferrari? What's that? A car?”

He laughed and shook his head. She studied his face.

“Why do you need to be a football player to do all that? Why can't you go to college, get yourself a good job, and work hard? Just like everybody else.”

“Take a long time to save the kind of money I'm talking about.”

“I guess you can just become a Rap star then. That your backup plan?”

He grumbled something under his breath.

“Figure now I'll end up like all the other homey niggers around here. I'll be getting a job at Short Stuff's Barbecue just like you.”

She jumped across the table and smacked him across the top of the head.

“I hear that kind of talk again and I'll kick you out of my house. You hear me?”

He stood up and walked out the back door. Ivy went to the window and watched him in the back yard. He was throwing rocks through a tire hanging from a tree. Billy's father had put the tire up for him and showed him how to practice throwing. She heard a car and looked out the front window. It was Jerry. He got out and walked around the side of the house. Ivy put her ear to the

door, trying to listen to Jerry and Billy. Jerry did most of the talking. She could barely make out what they were saying. It sounded like they were talking about football and Billy getting back on the team. Ivy closed her eyes, trying to hear their words. There was a long silence and suddenly Jerry was standing inside the house. She jumped.

“Thought Billy might want to go to the game tonight.”

Billy walked inside and grabbed a carton of milk out of the refrigerator.

“Ready to go, Slick?”

Billy drank down a few huge gulps of milk then threw the carton in the trash can.

“Why would I go to a game if I ain't playing?”

“Because you've gotta show them you're ready to rock 'n roll. Stop that rumor mill they got going over at that high school.”

Billy shook his head.

“PR's part of the game, Slick. Come on.”

Billy thought about it. Ivy got a funny look on her face.

“I'm going with you. Let me get my stuff.”

Billy groaned.

“I can't go to a football game with my momma. Damn--”

Ivy walked out quickly. Jerry smacked Billy on the arm.

“Stick with me. This is all part of your Unk's plan to get you back playing football like nothing ever happened.”

As they drove to the game that evening, Ivy clutched a large paper bag, holding it tight to her body. Jerry was curious. He kept looking at it.

“You gonna tell me what's in that bag? You knit the team mascot a sweater?”

He reached over and tried to touch the bag, but Ivy snatched it away from him.

“Don't you worry about what I got in this bag. Just drive. Keep your eyes on the road.”

As they got to Hillside High School, Jerry parked the car and they all started walking toward the stadium together. Billy lagged way back, embarrassed in the usual way that any teenager is about being seen with family. People recognized Jerry and called out “Jammer Jerr.” A couple of men high-fived him. Jerry tried to act like it wasn't a big deal, but he loved being recognized. Billy saw some friends and headed off in their direction without a word. Jerry called to Billy but he had already disappeared into the crowd. Jerry smiled at Ivy.

“Guess it's just you and me.”

He looked at Ivy's bag, still curious about the contents. Ivy clutched the bag tight.

“Which way's the ladies room?”

Jerry pointed to the bleachers on the south side of the field. She walked away. Jerry called to her.

“I'll meet you in the stands.”

She didn't turn back. Jerry watched her, still wondering what she was up to. A man blindsided him with a “Jammer Jerr” and an almost tackle. Jerry shrugged him off and headed to get a hot dog.

In the women's restroom, Ivy searched for an empty stall, but they were all taken. She saw a closet that was slightly open and snuck inside. She tried to close the door, but it was stuck on a mop handle. She took a poster board out of the bag and began writing on it with a large marker. She tried to stay out of sight from the other women in the bathroom. A woman opened the door.

“You work here? These toilets are filthy.”

Ivy considered, holding her anger. She decided to go along with the woman just to get her out of the way.

“I'll get them cleaned up right away. Just for you. Anything else I can do for you today, ma'am?”

The woman detected Ivy's tone and glared at her, then walked out in a huff. Ivy went back to her writing on the poster board. When she finished, she wrapped a sweater around the poster board and exited the bathroom.

In the stadium, Ivy walked slowly up the stairs, looking for her seat. She saw Jerry sitting alone and made her way toward him. Billy was sitting a dozen rows above with some friends. Ivy glanced up and saw him. He put his head down. She finally got to her seat but didn't sit. Jerry looked at her suspiciously.

“You missed the kickoff. Sit down.”

The woman from the bathroom was sitting right behind Ivy. She kept watching Ivy, still annoyed at her.

“Can you please sit down. We can't see.”

Ivy turned and gave the woman a nasty look.

“No.”

The woman turned to her husband. He shrugged. People nearby started snickering, waiting for an argument to break out. Jerry grabbed Ivy.

“Sit down, Ivy.”

Ivy pulled away. She looked around quickly then pulled out the poster board and held it up. The sign was written in the same neat letters as the sign she'd made at Short Stuff's Barbecue:

FOOTBALL IS HURTING OUR CHILDREN!

Jerry looked at the sign. It took a moment for the words to register, then he sprang up and grabbed the sign and tried to pull her down. Ivy spun around and almost lost her balance, but she wobbled back to her feet. She rebalanced herself using the woman from the bathroom's face. The woman squawked like a bird. Ivy stood on the seat and turned around for the crowd to see. She grabbed the sign from Jerry and held it high then called out for everyone to hear.

"Listen up--I got something to say."

There was a play on the field and the people booed her for getting in the way. One man threw popcorn at her, but Ivy wasn't about to stop now. She held the sign higher. There were more jeers and groans as more people looked her way and saw the sign. Jerry grabbed for the sign again, but she pulled it away from him and moved into the main aisle so the crowd could see it better. She waved the sign around as if she were cheering for one of the teams. A casual observer might think she was an over-enthusiastic mother of one of the kids on the field.

"You hear me. Football is hurting our children!"

The voices came from all directions now as even more people saw the sign. People below her were turning their heads back to see. Paper and popcorn began to shower her. It was sticking in her hair and her clothes. A hunk of ice whizzed by her face and hit a man five rows below, knocking his hat off. He jumped up and yelled back, shaking his fist. Voices peppered Ivy from all directions now.

"Sit down!"

"Shut up!"

"You're crazy!"

"Get outta here, you crazy fucking woman!"

Jerry tried to wrestle her into her seat, but she fell backwards into the woman from the bathroom. The woman's husband yelled at Ivy. Jerry grabbed the man by the collar and yanked him to his feet. They scuffled and fell over several people, then tripped and rolled into the main aisle. Jerry walloped the man then smacked him around on the concrete. His wife screamed for help. Two cops pushed through the crowd and ran up and pulled Jerry off the man. Jerry struggled against the cops. He couldn't help it. It was part of his nature. Jerry was stronger but one of the cops somehow got a cuff on his left wrist. Jerry spun around and knocked the first cop down. The second cop was quick. He snapped the other cuff over Jerry's belt and clicked it. Jerry only had one hand now. The first cop pulled out a Taser and put it in Jerry's face.

“We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Jerry grabbed the cop by the neck with his free hand then head-butted him.

SHAZZUP!

The cop tased Jerry. He dropped to the concrete. The cops got the other cuff on Jerry then hauled him away. People applauded. Teenage boys started chanting “Jammer Jerr, Jammer Jerr.” It was almost like the old days when Jerry made a great tackle on a running back, except now Jerry was headed to jail instead of the locker room and the after game party.

During the ordeal, Billy had been staying out of sight. He pulled his jacket over his head and walked down through the crowd and tried to pull his mother away. She pushed him back then held up her sign again. The woman’s husband from the bathroom grabbed Ivy’s sign and tore it in half right in Ivy’s face.

“Go protest the hot dogs, lady. They don’t put onions on them anymore.”

Ivy stared at the man as people booed her. Billy put his head down and tried to pull her along.

“Come on--”

Ivy wouldn’t quit staring at the man. He stood up and got in her face. The woman from the bathroom grabbed her husband and pulled him away. Ivy picked up the shreds of her sign and walked on alone.

Jerry sat in the Durham City jail cell, staring at the floor. A drunk man was in with him. The drunk stumbled to his feet and moved closer to Jerry.

“Hey, I know you?”

Jerry glared at the man.

“You played football--Dallas.”

For some reason, Jerry corrected him. Maybe it was pride.

“Atlanta.”

The drunk staggered closer.

“That’s right. You played for New Orleans. Jammin’ Jimmy.”

Jerry didn’t bother correcting him this time. The drunk smiled, getting too close with turpentine breath.

“You were good except I lost 400 dollars on that playoff game. You missed that tackle on Henderson. Remember that, Jimmy Jammer?”

He held out his wavering hand.

"I want my 400 dollars back. Right now. Come on--"

The man put his face close to Jerry's face. Jerry contemplated knocking him out, but it wasn't worth it. He didn't need any more trouble. Jerry moved away. The guard walked up.

"Free to go, Mr. Gotschall."

He unlocked the door and let Jerry out. The drunk yelled.

"Hey. What about me? He still owes me 400 dollars. Tell him to pay my bail."

In the lobby of the police station, Jerry walked out and looked around. Ivy was sitting in a chair, waiting for him. Jerry walked silently past her toward the exit. He stopped and looked back. She stood up. He stared at her a long moment.

"Thanks."

She nodded then walked ahead of him. Jerry called to her.

"Ivy."

She stopped at the door and looked back at him. Whatever he wanted to say wouldn't come out. He walked over and touched her shoulder. She walked on out the door. As he followed her out of the police station, suddenly news cameras and reporters descended on them. A reporter poked a microphone in Jerry's face.

"Jerry Gotschall--Jammer Jerr. Do you have something you'd like to say to everyone?"

Jerry looked around at the crowd which had gathered to see what was going on. If he closed his eyes and listened, he could've been back in the NFL after a big win. Jerry pushed the mic out of the way.

"I don't have anything to say. It was all a misunderstanding. It wasn't a fight."

The reporter dogged him.

"I'm talking about the protest."

Jerry snarled at the man.

"What protest?"

Another reporter was suddenly in Jerry's face.

"Are you using your position as a former NFL player to protest the violent nature of football?"

Another reporter chimed in.

"Medical research shows that football head injuries are just now being understood. Are you making a statement, Mr. Gotschall?"

Jerry pushed his way through the crowd.

“Statement? No, Hell no--”

The reporters followed Jerry, leaving Ivy standing alone. Ivy looked around, then walked back up and stood on the top step.

“I got something to say.”

Everyone stopped and looked back at her. Microphones and cameras pushed in close. A reporter asked who she was. Ivy took a deep breath.

“I'm his sister-in-law. My name's Ivy Gotschall. My boy Billy got hurt playing football. I just want everybody to know that there's something wrong with this whole thing. The system is bad. We've got to find a way to stop hurting our children. We've got to think about the ones coming up.”

A reporter shoved his mic too close to her face.

“Are you saying we should stop football altogether?”

Ivy thought a long moment then pushed the mic away.

“I don't know. I don't know what to do.”

Jerry shoved the reporter then took Ivy's arm.

“Leave us alone. We don't have anything else to say.”

The reporter and the mic were back in Ivy's face again.

“Are you going to sue?”

Ivy shook her head quickly then pushed away from Jerry.

“I don't want no money. My boy got hurt. It could've been a lot worse but the good Lord spared him. I don't want it to happen to anybody else. That's all I got to say. Excuse me.”

She pushed through the crowd and she and Jerry made their way through the people to an empty parking lot. Jerry pulled out his phone.

“I'll call a cab.”

She stared at him. Jerry tried the phone but it was dead. He threw it down.

“You planned all this, didn't you? Dragging my name into it.”

Ivy was ready for him. She wasn't backing down.

“I didn't plan nothing. I was just expressing my opinion. It's a free country.”

Jerry tried to hold his temper.

“Why do you want to go and mess everything up? Carrying protest signs around football games like some crazy hippie woman from the sixties.”

“I ain't messing nothing up. I'm just protecting my son. Other people have children, too. That's what a mother does. She protects her children and other children.”

He picked up his phone and put it in his pocket.

“Think about what you're doing, Ivy. Think about it.”

She walked away.

Later that night, Jerry drove around Chapel Hill, thinking about everything. Billy's head injury was starting to get out of hand. Ivy was making a big deal out of nothing. And he was furious with her for dragging his name into it. He felt like he'd been tricked by her, set up. He didn't understand why she was doing this to him. He saw one of his Linebacker car washes. The bays were empty and dirty except for a wino who slumped against a wall, drinking from a paper bag. Jerry turned into the car wash. He yelled at the wino who got up slowly and staggered away. Jerry pulled a pint of booze from under the seat and drained it in two gulps. He saw a car turn in. It was Bubba's black SUV. Jerry slowly got out of his car, and snuck around to a service door to the pump room, and slid inside.

Bubba rolled out of his SUV and walked over and poked around Jerry's car. He was eating a Short Stuff's barbecue sandwich. Bubba pulled out a switchblade, opened it, speared a piece of pork and ate it. Then, one by one, he walked around and dug his long knife into each of Jerry's tires. The tires deflated with a quiet PHHHHTTT, almost happy to give up their burden. Bubba knew Jerry was watching from somewhere. After he was done with the tires, he stood there and slowly finished off the barbecue sandwich, savoring every juicy bite. He threw the wrapper down and called out to Jerry.

“I keep telling you, Jerr. You need to get these car washes of yours cleaned up. Nobody wants to bring their car to a dirty car wash. I'm just trying to give you a little advice.”

Bubba wiped his greasy hands on Jerry's windshield, got in his car and drove away.

9. Leaving the Nest

The next day was a football Saturday. All three big schools in the area had home games. Short Stuff's was a lot busier than usual. The phone was ringing off the hook. Shorty was taking orders, about to go crazy. Ivy stood alone, refilling the condiments. The other workers were standing around one of the large televisions, watching the news which showed Ivy holding up her protest sign at the football game. Ivy made sure not to look over at the others. Shorty walked up and smacked his hands together.

"I pay you people to watch TV?"

Everyone scattered, still looking back at Ivy's image on the screen. Ivy glanced back at Shorty, trying to concentrate on her work. He walked up and stood beside her a moment before he spoke.

"Look, Ivy. Ain't none of my business what you do on your own time. But I got a restaurant to run here. And you know how much my customers love sports. Especially football."

Ivy kept filling a bottle of Short Stuff's barbecue sauce, not looking him in the eye.

"You firing me?"

Shorty took the bottle of sauce from her and inspected it, then shook it hard to mix the contents.

"I'm not firing you, Ivy. I just can't have any protesting going on here. I'll be out of business in a week. Understand?"

She nodded.

Shorty looked back to the television. The workers were gathered around it again, watching Ivy and her protest. Jerry's photo was on the television. It showed him in his prime, in his Atlanta uniform. Shorty shook his head.

"Shit--"

In the front yard of the Gotschall house, Billy and Martin tossed a football. Martin played tight end on the team. He was Billy's favorite receiver. Billy wore his blue-and-white Hillside Hornets' practice jersey. Martin threw him a bullet. Billy snagged it one-handed without a thought.

"How's it going with Elisa?"

Billy paused.

"Why you asking?"

Billy shot him a perfect bullet that stung Martin's hands. He tried not to show how much it hurt, but he let out a little yelp to himself.

“Just curious.”

Ivy walked up, carrying groceries and wearing her Short Stuff’s uniform. She looked tired. She watched them a moment. Billy ignored his mother. Martin threw the ball hard back to Billy.

“Gonna help your momma?”

Billy just stood there, holding the ball. Martin ran over and grabbed the groceries from Ivy.

“Need some help, Mrs. Gotschall?”

Ivy smiled at him.

“Least somebody's got some manners. Thank you, Martin.”

In the kitchen, Martin packed away the groceries. Billy watched him, annoyed. Ivy straightened up the living room, acting like she wasn’t listening.

“You gonna be at practice tonight? It's a full dress-out. We got new uniforms.”

Billy nodded.

Ivy was suddenly there. Martin realized it was time to leave. He tossed Billy the football and headed out. Ivy watched Billy, waiting for him to talk. He opened the refrigerator door. She stopped it with her foot.

“What practice?”

“I need some milk.”

Ivy studied his face. He started to walk out, but she got in front of him.

“Long as you're eating my groceries and sleeping in my house, you are my baby and I'm gonna do everything I can to take care of you. And what are you doing with that football uniform on?”

He took a deep breath.

“Just a jersey. I'm feeling fine now.”

She shook her head.

“You're lucky you're not laid up at Duke hospital paralyzed. They just use people. It's all a trick to make money, Billy. Don't you understand what's going on?”

He put the football in his mother's face.

“Football players get rich. Who's using who?”

She smacked the football out of his hand. Billy bent down to pick it up, but she put her foot on it.

“They're just trading money for their health. Look at your uncle. His knee’s messed up. And his mind, he's not there half the time. And he’s getting worse.”

He chuckled.

“That's because he still parties all the time.”

She shook her head and stared him down.

“It's because he played football too long. He got hit in the head too many times.”

He laughed.

“You don't know anything about it.”

He grabbed the football and stormed out of the house. Ivy followed him to the door and called to him.

“Where you going?”

He didn't bother to look back.

“Staying with Unk.”

She watched him disappear down the street. A large van pulled up in front of her house. It had a microwave transmitter on top and a Channel 11 logo, the local NBC affiliate. A woman reporter jumped out of the van and walked up quickly to Ivy, flashing a broad a smile. Her name was Hannah Huckabee. Her real name was Gladys Fesperman, but that name didn't sound good on camera, in a medium-size market like Raleigh-Durham or any market for that matter. The cameraman lagged behind her, setting up his equipment, eating a pack of crackers, and checking the light with a meter.

“Mrs. Gotschall, I'd like to talk to you. Do you have time?”

Ivy shook her head quickly.

“No.”

She slammed the door. Hannah walked up onto the porch and knocked, then spoke into the door.

“Mrs. Gotschall, this could be your chance to tell everyone what you want them to know. We're a national outlet with affiliates all across the nation. Please, Mrs. Gotschall. I'm here to help you speak out to the public. I won't even ask you any questions. You can just say what's on your mind.”

A moment passed. Ivy opened the door slowly. Hannah smiled, her too-white teeth glistening in the afternoon sun. She still had her make-up on which made her glow orange in the sun.

“Ten minutes. That's all I need.”

Ivy stepped onto the porch. She looked at the camera which was pointing at her. It looked like the barrel of a cannon. It made her nervous. Hannah smiled.

“I'll prep you first then we can put it down on tape. We'll be done before you know it. Okay?”

Ivy thought about it. She kept looking at the camera.

"I don't want to do this now."

"Don't worry about the way you look. I can get the make-up girl out here in fifteen minutes. She'll have you looking like a movie star."

Ivy shook her head.

"I don't care about that. I need to think about all this."

Hannah looked at the cameraman. He made a quick head motion as he finished the last of his crackers.

"Okay, how about plan B? Can you come down to the studio later? I'll work with you. I promise. I want to help you get your story out there. I really think it's important. I can send a car for you around six-thirty and we can put it on the 11 o'clock news tonight."

Ivy thought about it. She looked at one of Billy's deflated footballs on the porch. It was the same orange color as Hannah's face.

"I need a couple days."

On the practice field at Hillside High School that evening, the players were dressed out in their new uniforms, everyone except Billy. Billy was hanging around with some of the offensive players in the end zone. He was wearing his old uniform, tossing a football around. The tight end, Powell, threw Billy a bullet. He caught the ball between his legs. It was an old show-off trick he'd learned from his father. Other players ran up and surrounded Billy. Billy knew they wanted to talk about his injury. It took a moment before Powell finally got it out.

"Man, we thought you were finished."

Kyle, the center, piped in.

"Told us you were paralyzed from the neck down. Couldn't move a fucking finger."

Billy shook his head.

"Know what they say about rumors. Like the one about you and Darlene Gladwell going steady."

The other players laughed and punched the 260-pound center. Powell made a motion for Billy.

"Go long, Billy."

Billy hesitated a moment then took off on a long route for a pass. He ran as hard as he could, but his body wasn't doing what it usually did on his command. His legs ached, his neck was sore, his arms seemed like pendulums out of balance. It hurt to turn his head back and look for the toss. Powell finally let the ball fly when Billy hit the 40 yard line. Billy looked back for the ball, lost his

balance, then tripped and fell. He rolled out of bounds and lay there, not moving. The players ran up. Powell got there first.

“Billy. Hey, you alright, man?”

Billy lay there in the grass a few moments, then pulled himself up and sat. He tried to stand but he seemed dizzy. Other players approached and surrounded him. They all looked worried. Billy suddenly sprang to his feet and laughed.

“Just playing a trick on you.”

He grabbed the ball then tossed it back to Powell. Powell shook his head.

“Not funny, man.”

Two defensive players jogged up--Venable, a huge lineman, and Heffinger, the second-string linebacker who had hit Billy and injured him. Neither had ever liked Billy. It went deeper than the usual jealousy the defense had for the offense. Billy had gotten a scholarship to N.C. State. He was on track to be a star. He was already a star in the eyes of a lot of the players, especially the ones who knew this was as far as they'd go with football. Venable and Heffinger would do some time at a junior college, or if they were lucky, they'd make the meat squad at a four-year school. The meat squad was what the varsity practiced on. They were the expendables, the untouchable caste in college football. They never got any glory. They were just flesh and bone to be ground in the mill. Venable shot a football hard into Billy's stomach. Billy caught it without reaction. Venable grinned.

“Why's your momma want to ruin football for the rest of us? If you're too chicken to play, then just let the men play. This ain't a game for pussies.”

Billy glanced at Heffinger. He was staring at Billy, waiting for his reaction with a hint of a sneer on his face. There was no apology in his eyes for what had happened. Billy didn't expect any. Venable moved closer as more players gathered around. There was that feeling in the air--a feeling that players could sense when a fight was about to break out--the posturing, the line drawn in the sand. Billy and the offense stood on one side. The defense gathered on the other side. Venable continued his insults, punching his grimy, taped-up fingers in the air.

“I saw her on the television. Running her goddam mouth. Your momma's got a big mouth on her.”

The defensive players laughed. Heffinger kept staring at Billy. Billy stared back. Heffinger seemed to be waiting for Billy to make a move or at least say something. Venable looked around at the other players and smiled.

“And a big butt.”

He made a humping motion with his hips and hands. Billy threw the football hard at Venable, stinging him in the ear. Venable grabbed his ear, paused a second then pushed Billy hard, knocking him to the ground. Billy jumped up and tackled him. Heffinger jumped into the mix and the boys hit the ground in a whirlwind of fists and elbows. The players on each side watched silently. None of them jumped in to stop it. Not even Martin who was Billy's best friend. This was part of their code. They stood by until two of the assistant coaches saw the fray and ran over and pulled the boys apart. Billy had a swelling eye. Venable had a broken finger. An assistant coach grabbed Billy and hauled him off toward Coach Sauerbeck's office.

Billy sat in the coach's office, slumped in a chair, favoring his right eye. Coach Sauerbeck walked in and threw him an ice pack.

"You know what I think about fighting, Billy."

Billy shrugged.

"And don't tell your momma how you got that shiner. She'll have my hide."

Billy nodded as he put the ice pack on his eye. Coach Sauerbeck studied his face.

"So your momma thinks football's a bad thing?"

Billy shrugged.

"I don't know what she thinks. I moved out of the house."

"Moved out? That a fact?"

"Moved in with my Unk. We've been practicing."

"Practicing? You better not be drinking beer over at his house. I hear Jerry has some wild parties."

Billy grinned slightly, moving the ice around his eye.

"We're running plays, working out, just like the pros. I'll teach all the guys on the team if you want. We'll be state champs with all I'm learning."

The coach sat back in his chair and thought about it. He knew what was coming next.

"I want back on the team, Coach. I'm alright. Honest."

The coach looked him over good.

"Fighting your way of proving it?"

Billy shrugged.

"You're a minor. I have to have your mother's permission and your doctor's."

Billy thought fast. He had a plan even if it was mostly a lie.

"I'll get Unk's. He's my guardian now."

"That a fact? Still need the doctor to sign."

Billy hunched forward in the chair.

"You got the form?"

The coach slowly reached in his drawer and pulled out a consent form and tossed it at Billy.

"I just want to play, Coach."

"I know, Billy. Get the form signed and we'll go from there. I'm willing to work with you, but it's your momma I'm worried about. She's still your momma no matter what."

Billy stood up.

"Thanks, Coach."

Coach Sauerbeck clapped his hands like it was time to head out to practice.

"Alright then, let's get to it."

Billy set the ice pack on the coach's desk and headed out the door with a hop in his step. The coach went to the window and watched him with a sad smile, then sat at his desk and slowly opened the drawer. He pulled out a piece of paper. There was nothing special about the piece of paper, nothing to indicate that it was different than any other piece of paper. On it was a list of names in three columns, front and back. The names were in alphabetical order. They were the names of local high school and college football players with head, neck, and spine injuries. These were players who would never move to the next level. Junior varsity players who would never play varsity high school football. High school players who would never play college football. College players who would never play professional football. The name "William Gotschall" was on The "List" a third of the way down in the second column on the front page. It was supposed to be a secret list, but anybody could get it if they knew the right people. It was the same list Bubba had told Jerry about. Nobody knew where The List came from. There was no date or title on The List. It simply appeared on a regular basis, as if by magic. The Sports Machine knew what was coming. It had known for a long time. That's why it had created The List. The List was a hedge, just like Wall Street had its hedges. The List was a stopgap, a little bit of insurance in a risky business. But with all the Sports Machine's cunning and money and lawyers and resources and hedges and tricks and even The List, it still couldn't figure out how to sidestep the fact that playing football fucked up your brain big time. A lot of white kids and their parents had already figured this out and told the Sports Machine "No thanks, fuck off" and those kids had quit football. That left another group of children for the Sports Machine to continue to trick. And the Sports Machine had a lot of tricks to keep right on scrambling those young eggs. A lot of tricks.

10. The Easily Amused

Mr. E.P. Rose called me up. I'd fallen asleep. The little green fairy stuff was working pretty well on my egg. When I answered the phone, Mr. Rose was already talking a mile a minute. It took three minutes for the little green fairy stuff to wear off enough so I could understand a word of what Mr. Rose was saying. This is some of what I think he said, but I could be wrong.

"We need to be careful and not alienate our readers when writing a book about popular culture. We don't want to alienate the *Easily Amused*."

"Easily Amused? What's that?" I asked, still trying to push the green absinthe little green fairy fog out of my busted brain.

"You know," he said with a funny sound in his voice.

I suddenly got what he was trying to tell me. He was saying I was one of the Easily Amused. I lit into him.

"I don't know what the fuck you're talking about because I am easily amused. Are you making fun of me, goddamit, Mr. Rose?"

He was quiet for a long time and this gave me some time for my brain synapses to percolate a little. It's true. I am easily amused. Just take me to the nearest megaplex and sit me down in front of any Johnny Depp movie with an extra-large popcorn, a Coke, and some Milk Duds, and I'm happy. Happy as goddam Goldilocks in the woods searching for porridge and flowers and fraternity boys at the University of Virginia.

"My book is about cracking eggs, not the Easily Amused," I yelled into the phone.

He suddenly changed the subject to Adolf Eichmann and Nazi Germany, but I don't think he was done with the Easily Amused thing. Mr. Rose is Jewish--half Jewish. His father was Jewish and his mother was a chain-smoking, born-again Christian who sent money to televangelists in exchange for prayer cloths dipped in the Jordan River. Adolf Eichmann, as I learned from Mr. Rose, was a middle man. He passed the buck. You might remember the "banality of evil" thing. Eichmann was a bureaucrat, who through bureaucratic means, committed unspeakable evil. You might see where this is going, maybe not. Mr. E.P. Rose made a special point that we should in no way compare those evils with anything in this book, and I totally agree with Mr. E.P. Rose. What Adolph Eichmann and the German people did is simply an example of how following the law and tradition and other kinds of bullshit people pile up can result in bad things, very bad things.

Mr. Rose got on sort of a rant about Eichmann. I finally yelled into the phone and told him to shut up, then I explained to him that this goddam thing we were writing was turning into a piece of

raccoon meat and to shut the fuck up about Adolf Eichmann. I'm from the South where people eat raccoon. Raccoon meat has a funny thing about it or so I'm told (I've never eaten any). The more you chew it, the bigger it gets in your mouth. That's the way I'm starting to feel about this book. I'm never going to swallow the goddam raccoon meat. I'm never going to finish. Mr. E.P. Rose was silent for a few moments--I knew he was either thinking or Googling on his computer. There was probably an equal chance he was doing one or the other. He suddenly got even more upset and yelled into the phone, almost as if he had a piece of raccoon meat stuck in his throat and he was trying to get it to go one way or the other. This is some of what E.P. said, or at least what I can recall.

"Google is mostly about surfing porn, right? Their stock price is based purely on how many hits they get and serving up pornography to the world provides most of those hits. All the other stuff Google does like self-driving cars and shitty word-processing programs and Gmail are all diversions from the real business of Google. Porn! Little old ladies own Google stock. My grandmother owns Google stock. Churches own Google stock. TV preachers own Google stock. College presidents, those cocksuckers of cocksuckers, own Google stock. Deans of medical schools own Google stock. Google is a pornographic monopolistic empire that makes a lot of people rich by serving up porn that shows women (and men) fucking everything that moves, sometimes even raccoons."

I yawned into the phone as loud as I could, hoping he would get the message, but he was nowhere near finished. Personally I've never seen anyone doing the nasty with a raccoon but I'm sure it's out there if you Google hard enough. Mr. Edward P. Rose kept going a mile a minute. He has a habit of doing this to me, especially when I'm trying to work.

"Environmentalists fly to global warming conferences across oceans on airplanes that suck down kerosene like W.C. Fields slogged Beefeater gin. A 747 has a fuel capacity of approximately 50,000 gallons of kerosene. It drinks kerosene at 1 gallon per second, or for a ten-hour flight, that means it takes about 40,000 gallons of kerosene for the 747 to fly the fucking environmentalist to the goddam global warming conference in Helsinki, or wherever the fuck they're going. That's just one plane load of global warming environmentalists going to one fucking global warming conference. This *thing* we're working on isn't just about Billy. It's about hypocrisy. It's about the frog in the pot of water who doesn't realize the water is boiling. It's about the Germans and Adolf Eichmann and the banality of evil thing when they passed the buck, did their job, obeyed the law, and maintained the status quo. It's about the middle managers. It's about college presidents who long ago should have taken action and quit pimping out football players to the NFL, and who should have long ago stopped fraternity boys from drugging coeds in their fraternity houses by shutting the fuckers down, locking the doors, and kicking them off campus. The purpose of colleges and

universities is not to be co-conspirators in the exploitation and rape of its students. This thing is about me and you. It's about all of us. Understand?"

I nodded and said, "Sure, Mr. E. P. Rose. I get it. I really do. That's why I'm writing this fucking piece of raccoon meat, cocksucker!"

I cleared my throat. I took a giant gulp of Old Crow, and then I yelled at him even louder.

"You know I love flying to places like Hawaii on big jets."

He paused a moment, and then admitted that he had a fondness for Hawaii as well. Then he told me that he'd just gone to Fiji with his family. He paused another moment. When Mr. Rose pauses, it usually means that more is coming. And more did come. That's when he told me about the Google paradox which goes something like the following. Sorry if I'm boring you, but Mr. Rose is pretty smart and he makes sense most of the time. Remember, he went to that fancy college in Connecticut. A lot of presidents and CIA people went there, for what that's worth. Here's what Mr. Edward P. Rose said about the Google paradox.

When you get a job at Google, you have to sign two forms, among others. The first form is the usual government mule Sexual Harassment mumbo-jumbo form that says you will not harass or grope or fondle or even look at fellow employees with lust in your eyes. The second form says that, as an employee of Google, your job will require you to be viewing, interacting with, disseminating, distributing, and propagating pornographic videos and images and other material to every corner of the planet, some of which may be violent, abhorrent, unnatural, bestial, criminal, and flat-out sick as a sick puppy (at least in the U.S.) in nature. How can these two things, which are diametrically opposed, exist together? Two answers, really, according to Mr. Edward P. Rose. You know the first answer. Money. That's easy. The second answer is a bit trickier. Google hires mostly Asians and Indians, H1B Visa people, who, first of all can't believe they're in America with high-paying jobs that should have been given to American college students from the economically depressed midwest, and secondly, are scared shitless of having a political voice against the amazing cash-generating porno machine that allows them to send money back home to the third-world places they've miraculously escaped. Google does not recruit from the Seven Sisters or anywhere else in America where people are politically active or even politically aware, because if it did, they would burn the motherfucker straight down to the ground when they found out first hand that pornography is the engine that runs Google. And after they burned it down, they'd shove its Googly ashes into the San Francisco Bay and start out in search of the next Google replacement, which of course would spring up immediately in its place somewhere in the hinterlands of Silicon Valley. Mr. Rose started yelling again, something about how the fall of all empires was preceded by the proliferation of pornography and decadence. He then told me to go watch the movie *Cabaret* with Liza Minelli in it, which he said

was about Germany right before the shit really hit the fan. I yawned again and then I told him that I was tired and that I wasn't going to watch any movie about Germany with Liza Minelli in it right before the shit hit the fan because I had to keep slogging away on this giant piece of raccoon meat that we were creating. I wasn't even sure who Liza Minelli is or was to be honest, although I think a lot of gay guys like her. I like gay guys so don't be jumping on my ass about that one. Then I hung up on him and took another huge swig of booze, followed by a big pull of the absinthe, hoping that maybe the little green fairy would appear and maybe point me in the right direction, whatever or wherever that might be, even if it was a movie with Liza Minelli singing and dancing in it.

Sheeeew! So now I'm drunk, I'm tired, and my head is hurting. I don't know if it's from all the times I took the Hillerich & Bradsby Louisville Slugger baseball bat to my egg, or if it's the drugs and the booze. I apologize if you thought this was the kind of book where the team wins the big game in the end. You know, the kind of book that Hollywood makes into a shitty, fill-in-the-blank movie chock full of faux sentimentality where the team somehow pulls it together and wins at the last second. Wow, didn't see that coming, said the one audience member who actually had a functioning brain. It's the kind of movie with Denzel Washington or Kevin Costner playing the coach (they're in most of them), where everyone leaves the theatre feeling all warm and fuzzy because one team's eggs beat the motherfucking shit out of the other team's eggs. They'll keep making those goddam movies until the sun sputters one last time and flames out in a cosmic puff of smoke. Know why? Mr. E.P. Rose told me why in our conversation about Adolf Eichmann and Nazi Germany. And no, it's not because the male executives at HBO (and all the networks and studios for that matter) are assholes with short skinny cocks who drive leased Ferraris and have wet dreams of being football players and actually getting women to somehow have sex with them without having to pay them money. That's a given. The reason they'll keep making football movies and because football will continue to be a part of our culture is because of the failure of average people, the Easily Amused, to think. At his trial, Eichmann displayed neither guilt nor hatred, claiming he bore no responsibility because he was simply "doing his job." He did his duty, obeyed orders, and he also obeyed the law. The Nazis and that includes the "banality of evil" German people who let them get away with all that shit were the greatest villains in the history of everything, at least when it comes to making movies, although Hollywood is making very good coin off the Arabs these days. (And you wonder why they're pissed off at us?) College presidents don't make good villains, and so it's a lot harder for fuckers like me and Mr. E.P. Rose to convince you of what a bunch of cocksucking pimps they really are. Let me put it another way in case you didn't get it. COLLEGE PRESIDENTS ARE COCKCUCKING PIMPS.

I just took another hit of speed and washed it down with some Old Crow and had another swig of the absinthe. Maybe I'll see a little green fairy pretty soon. Colleges are supposed to be safe places for everybody--football players and women. Go read your favorite college's handbook that squawks about all that bullshit. It's Mr. Rose's turn again. Wait. I just saw something green flash across my computer screen. I hope it was the little green fairy. Maybe the absinthe is working.

11. Panty Raid

In the upscale suburban neighborhood of Woodcroft on the west side of Durham, Billy strolled down the street, tossing a Nerf football he'd found in the gutter. He was feeling good. His plan was set. Jerry would sign as his guardian on the consent form. Why not? Jerry wanted him to keep playing ball. All he would need now was a doctor's signature on the form and things would be back to normal. N.C. State would re-instate his scholarship. Why wouldn't they? He was, after all, a great prospect. He could throw a football 70 yards, hit a quarter, and flip it from heads to tails. That was more than talent. That was fucking amazing. And he knew Jerry knew lots of doctors--sports doctors were what Jerry called them. He pulled the consent form out of his pocket and looked at it as he walked. It seemed like such a good plan. All he had to do was get Jerry to go along.

Billy stopped at a handsome two-story colonial brick house. Jerry's car was out front. Billy walked up to the house and stopped. A pair of yellow panties were snagged on the slate steps that led up to the porch. He looked at them a moment then rang the bell. No answer. He rang a few more times. Jerry finally appeared. He looked tired, hung over. He squinted in the light.

"There he is. What up, Slick?"

Billy wasn't sure what to say. He seemed a little confused about the panties. He looked back at them. Jerry didn't notice them. If he did, it didn't seem to matter that they were on his front lawn in broad daylight. Billy shuffled around.

"I come in?"

Jerry yawned and stretched his arms, trying to shake off the night.

"You know my house is your house. Get your skinny butt in here."

He grabbed Billy and smacked his rear as he entered the house. It was a beautiful house, but it looked like a fraternity lived in it. The living room was full of expensive but broken furniture. The fine leather couches were now ratty with cigarette burns and stains. Billy could see the kitchen on the split level. The counters were full of beer cans. Dirty dishes were scattered everywhere. Jerry smiled.

"House cleaner called in sick."

Billy looked around, taking it all in. A naked black woman stepped into view in the hallway. Her name was Nancy. Jerry hardly noticed her.

"Seen my drawers, Jerr?"

Jerry shrugged. Nancy looked at Billy and smiled.

"How about you?"

Billy didn't know what to do--to look at her, to talk to her, to turn around and run. He got out a few grunts as she stood there in her glory.

"Huh? Uh--I--"

He pointed outside. She walked closer to him, into full view now, and smiled at him.

"Can you get them for me? I don't think that lady who lives across the street that's always spying on Jerry would like to see me in my birthday suit again."

She cackled. Billy looked at Jerry. He smiled and nodded. Billy opened the front door, slipped outside, and quickly grabbed the panties, all the while on the lookout for the nosy neighbor woman. He walked back in and handed them to Nancy, holding them ever so delicately with two fingers. She grazed her fingers across his cheek then grabbed his right hand.

"Nice hands. You a quarterback or a receiver, a giver or a taker?"

She laughed and winked at Jerry. Billy looked at Jerry, not sure if he should answer.

"Billy's the best damn quarterback ever to come out of Durham, North Carolina. And next fall he's gonna be kicking ass and taking names for N.C. State."

Nancy stuck out her lip in a mock pout.

"That a fact? I used to go with a quarterback from State, but he didn't make the pros. I think he's selling shoes over in the mall now."

Jerry slapped Billy hard on the back.

"Billy ain't planning on selling no shoes, are you, Billy?"

Billy shook his head quickly. Nancy smiled.

"Just in case, I think I'll call you Payless until you make the pros. Hope you don't mind."

Billy frowned. Jerry shrugged at him. Billy tried not to watch as she slowly slipped into her panties. He focused his attention on a crooked photo on the wall of Jerry in his Atlanta football uniform. Nancy finally finished her panty business then gathered her things and walked past them both. Jerry promptly slapped her ass, grabbing a handful as if he were going to tear off a chunk. She squealed and stopped at Billy. He swallowed hard. She pinched his cheek.

"Call me when you make the pros, Payless."

She walked out the front door, still putting on her clothes as if she were trying to taunt the nosy neighbors. Billy stared at Jerry, wide-eyed. Jerry grinned.

"What? You ain't never seen a naked cheerleader before? Your Unk's still got his moves. Stick with me and I'll show you how Jammer Jerr really got his name. Want a beer? Come on. Your mamma know you're over here? What happened to your eye? Hope it was a girl."

12. Interview

A secretary led Ivy through the Channel 11 studios. It was dark and took a few moments for Ivy's eyes to adjust. In a corner of the studio, there was a couch and a chair. Both looked worn and faded. They seemed small and out of place. The whole studio looked fake to her. The logo for the station seemed like it had been spray-painted and made out of plywood. Hannah entered and said a quick hello then took Ivy over and sat her on the couch. Hannah was even more orange than before. An assistant whispered to Hannah as a pretty young woman named Sue prepared a kit so she could put makeup on Ivy. Ivy couldn't help but notice how smooth and clear Sue's skin was. She was much prettier than Hannah. Ivy wondered why Sue and Hannah didn't switch places. Ivy pulled back as Sue touched her. Sue smiled with perfect teeth.

"You don't want to shine on camera, do you?"

Hannah smiled, trying to put Ivy at ease.

"The video camera's a funny little monster. We all need some help."

Hannah sat down in the chair and gently touched Ivy's arm.

"I'm going to ask you some basic questions then we'll move on to other things."

Ivy nodded. After a few minutes of preparation from the crew and Hannah's assistant, the bright lights came up and the camera light came on. The lights were glaring in Ivy's eyes. Her mouth was getting dry. Hannah began the interview.

"Mrs. Gotschall, where were you born?"

Ivy tried to swallow. Her mouth was dry as cotton.

"Can I get some water?"

The assistant brought Ivy some water in a bottle and opened it for her. Ivy took a small sip. Hannah nodded to Ivy.

"Whenever you're ready, Mrs. Gotschall. Camera's rolling."

Ivy put the cap on the water and looked at Hannah.

"I was born right here in Durham in Duke Hospital."

"So you've lived here all your life?"

"That's right."

"And you have a son, Billy?"

"That's right."

Ivy was getting more nervous. Her hands were shaky and sweaty. Hannah bent forward and took her hand.

“You can relax. It’s just like we’re chatting on your front porch. We can edit it down and take out the stuff we don’t want. Just take a deep breath. Watch me.”

Hannah took a deep breath, something that looked like it came from a Yoga class. Ivy watched her, wondering what she was doing, then she took a quick breath, sat back and took another quick drink of water. Hannah moved closer, batting her eyes like she was truly concerned.

“Tell us about your son, Billy.”

Ivy took a long breath.

“Well, he’s my only son. My husband, William, died about eight years ago and I’m raising Billy by myself. He’s all I’ve got.”

Ivy paused and took another deep breath. Hannah put her hand on her chin, feigning sympathy.

“What happened to him? Please tell us.”

“Billy got hurt playing football. The doctor at Duke called it a concussion. They didn’t tell me a whole lot else but they said he shouldn’t play football for a while. I don’t want him to play football ever again.”

“And why is that, Mrs. Gotschall?”

“Because he got hurt.”

Ivy seemed perturbed by the question. She tried to make her answer more clear.

“People get hurt playing football.”

Hannah smiled with her big white teeth, which now looked to Ivy as if they belonged to some strange zoo animal.

“People get hurt playing golf, volleyball, tennis. You can get hurt sitting on your couch playing a video game. I hear soccer is worse than football when it comes to head injuries.”

Ivy glared at her.

“It’s different. Football--”

“How is that, Mrs. Gotschall? Can you explain it for us?”

Ivy looked at her as if she were somehow trying to confuse her. Ivy’s voice began to quiver.

“Their heads, you know--”

“Can you tell us more about what you’ve learned about football head injuries? Are you an expert on head trauma? Do you have any medical training or other credentials, Mrs. Gotschall?”

Ivy stared at Hannah a long moment then took off her microphone. She didn't like anything about Hannah. And now she felt like Hannah had tricked her. Ivy stood up.

"I don't want to do this."

Hannah grabbed Ivy's arm, trying to get her to sit back down. Ivy wouldn't budge.

"Mrs. Gotschall, you're just nervous. Please have a seat. This won't take long. I promise. We can have it on the 11 o'clock news tonight."

Ivy shook her head.

"You said you were going to help me."

"We have to be objective. This is journalism. We have to show both sides of the story. That's how it works or else we'll appear biased."

Ivy shook her head again.

"No, I'm finished."

"What about the people out there? The mothers? Isn't there a message you want to send them? Think of all the kids you could help if you stopped them from playing football. Think of the worried parents with a kid in the hospital with a concussion--or worse."

Ivy looked into the camera and shook her head then walked out of the studio. Hannah followed her out into the street and down to the DATA bus stop. It was another windy day. Leaves and trash were blowing all around Ivy and Hannah, almost as if a small whirlwind was following them down the street. Hannah's hair was turning and twisting into strange shapes like the clouds in the sky. She tried to keep her hand on her hair and control it, but it was hopeless. Ivy ignored Hannah's pleas to come back into the studio. Hannah's hair looked like whipped cotton candy at the county fair.

When Ivy got back home, she sat at the kitchen table and looked out the window for a long time. A small sugar maple tree was showing its fall colors--buttery yellows and fluorescent golds. The wind was letting the leaves shimmer one last time before blowing them off onto the ground. Summer was gone. Soon it would be winter and all the trees would be black scratches against the sky. The phone rang. She let it ring. She knew who it was. It rang again. She saw a picture of Billy as a young boy on the counter. She picked it up and studied it. She went into the living room and pulled out photo albums. She looked through pictures of Billy as he grew. There were lots of pictures of Billy wearing football gear--uniforms, helmets, shoulder pads, cleats. He'd started to play organized football at age six. There were several photos of Billy and Jerry. One showed Billy at age eight wearing Jerry's Atlanta football helmet. The helmet came down over Billy's eyes. All you could see was Billy's grin from inside the helmet. There were photos of Billy and his father, William. One showed William coaching Billy's first Pee-Wee league team. The look in William's eyes said he was

hoping his son would be a football player. And now Ivy was trying to stop that--stop her husband's dream for his only son. Was she doing the right thing? She thought about all the other kids who played football--Billy's friends--all the hopes, all the dreams they had. She wasn't sure what she was doing now or even why she was doing it. She felt like she was letting everybody down. What made her special? Why couldn't she just stop her son from playing and be done with it? It wasn't up to her to make decisions for other people. She studied another photo of her husband. He seemed to be saying something with his eyes. She noticed the tree in the background of the photo. It was the same sugar maple that shimmered in her window now, just smaller and greener. William had planted that tree. Tears rolled down her cheeks. The phone rang again. She picked up the phone slowly. Hannah was already talking.

"What if we come to your house and do the interview? Maybe you wouldn't be so nervous."

"Don't come here."

"You worried about Billy seeing you?"

Ivy didn't answer. There was a long pause.

"Mrs. Gotschall, please don't hang up. I can help you get your message out there. I wasn't tricking you before. I have to be fair to both sides. Please--"

Ivy was still thinking.

She looked at a recent photo of Billy with his high school teammates. Something seemed to come to her.

"How about in front of Billy's school?"

Hannah was silent a moment. Ivy could hear a man's voice talking loudly to Hannah in the background. The man didn't seem happy. Hannah kept talking.

"He went to Hillside, didn't he? It's public property. We could show the school kids in the background. That's a great idea, Mrs. Gotschall. I can have a driver pick you up in about an hour."

"Okay," Ivy said. She hung up the phone quickly.

Ivy studied her husband's photo. There was something in his eyes she'd never seen. She wondered what he would do if he knew what she knew about football head injuries. She was thinking about the interview in front of the high school. She'd be prepared for Hannah's tricks this time. She looked closer at her husband's photo. Something seemed different in his eyes now. Maybe he was unhappy with what she was doing. Maybe he was happy with it. She didn't believe in dead people communicating with the living. That was granny woman stuff that she'd left a long time ago when she was a girl. She picked up the photo, turned it around, then laid it face down on the table.

A black limousine pulled up to Hillside High School. Ivy and Hannah emerged. A camera truck was already there with equipment and cameras ready to go. An assistant quickly got Ivy and Hannah into place, making sure the high school and football field were in the background. Sue, the pretty make-up woman, dusted them both off and gave Ivy an encouraging smile.

“Good luck.”

Ivy smiled at her. Ivy liked her. Hannah looked at her notes then took her place in front of the camera. Kids from the high school walked past. Some made faces at the camera. Ivy could see the cheerleaders as they practiced in the distance. She thought about Elisa. She hadn't seen much of her lately. Were she and Billy still going out? Hannah made a motion to the cameraman. He moved around to frame the shot so the football stadium was in the background. More kids tried to get into the shot but the assistant ran them off. Ivy was starting to get nervous again. She looked around, hoping Billy wouldn't walk up, but at the same time, she wanted him to know what she was doing. The assistant approached Ivy with a piece of cardboard and a marker.

“What's that for?”

Hannah took the marker and handed it to Ivy.

“Thought you might want to make a sign like you did for your protest and hold it up. We could put it in the shot so people could see it.”

Ivy shook her head. Hannah motioned to the cameraman then positioned Ivy exactly where she wanted her, making sure the school and football field were in the background.

“We'll pick up where we left off, okay?”

Ivy nodded.

“Mrs. Gotschall, please tell me more about what you found when you researched head injuries in football.”

Ivy thought a moment.

“I looked it up on the internet at the library. Google. There's all kinds of things that happen to football players' brains when they get hit in the head.”

“Do you think that somehow this information has been hidden--from parents--from the fans?”

“I don't know. It's all on the internet. Anybody can find it if they just look. But it's complicated. There's a lot more going on than just concussions. Lots of medical words and things I don't understand it. It accumulates.”

“What do you mean--it accumulates?”

Ivy glared at her. She wasn't sure if she was saying the word correctly, but she knew what she meant to say.

"You know. It adds up."

"You mean there's cumulative damage from repeated blows to the head?"

"Yes, but you have to be a doctor to understand it all."

"What would you like the viewers out there to know?"

"Know?"

"Yes, what would you like them to take away from your research."

Ivy thought a long moment and looked back over at the high school.

"I think until they find a way to make football safer, they should stop it--at least in high school, maybe even college."

"Stop high school football? Stop college football? All across the country? So you're calling for a moratorium on football?"

"A what?"

"A halt to football until more is known about head injuries."

Ivy nodded. The kids behind her made noises and clowned for the camera. Ivy's nervousness was turning to anger. Hannah motioned for the cameraman to move in tighter on Ivy's face. Hannah kept prodding.

"Football is so much a part of our culture. A lot of African-American kids use it as a way to go to college with hopes of playing professionally for the NFL."

Ivy stared at her.

"Mrs. Gotschall, are you saying that college and professional football are using poor and African-American kids in some type of farm system?"

Ivy continued to stare at her. She felt like Hannah was putting words in her mouth.

"Are you saying that football has echoes of slavery? Is that what you're saying, Mrs. Gotschall? Is that what your protest is really about? Are you making a political statement, Mrs. Gotschall? This isn't so much about your son Billy, is it, Mrs. Gotschall?"

The kids were shuffling and laughing now. Two white kids held up their fists and pumped them in mock black power fashion. Ivy turned back and looked at the kids. She wasn't mad at them, but somehow they made her angrier.

"My boy got hurt. I don't want anybody else's boy to get hurt."

Hannah touched Ivy's hand.

"I apologize. I'm not trying to put words in your mouth. Billy's uncle--your brother-in-law--Jerry Gotschall played professional football for Atlanta. He seems to be in a lot of trouble. I believe he was a linebacker. It's common knowledge that linebackers and linemen take and receive more hits than almost any other player on the team. Do you believe his behavior is linked to playing football?"

Ivy stared in Hannah's eyes a long moment. She still didn't like Hannah.

"Why don't you ask him?"

Ivy gathered her belongings and walked away quickly. The kids jumped in front of the camera. Hannah sighed and shook her head at the assistant.

"What do you think? I push it too much with the slavery thing? Maybe I did. That was stupid. We'll cut it."

The assistant shrugged and watched Ivy head off down the street.

"I don't know. How'd you like somebody to bang your head against the wall for two hours every day before you do your broadcast?"

Hannah smiled.

"The boss does it to me all the time, or maybe you didn't notice."

The assistant laughed.

"Want me to go get her?"

Hannah shook her head.

"Let her go. We got what we need."

13. Glory Days

The downstairs in Jerry's house was devoted to Jerry's football glory. It was a gigantic recreation room with pool tables, ping-pong tables, a jukebox, eight large-screen televisions, and walls chock full of Jerry's trophies, MVP jerseys, and newspaper and magazine articles. Billy stood mesmerized, looking at the summary of Jerry's career. Jerry was at the refrigerator, sorting through old pizza boxes for beer.

"I got this interior decorator lady to help me with my wall. Every player's got a wall. Looks a lot better than last time you saw it. Whatcha think?"

Billy nodded, immersed in a photograph of Jerry mashed up against two linemen, holding his own in the heat of a fierce battle on a muddy field.

"I call it my wailing wall. I come over here and cry at how good I used to be."

He laughed then pulled a handful of beers out of therefrigerator.

"I got Bud Light, some Heinekens."

Billy shook his head.

"I'm in training. Coach said he'd have my hide if he caught me drinking."

Jerry laughed and snagged a Heineken and threw it at Billy. Jerry yelled at him. Billy turned quickly and caught the beer behind his back.

"Damn. Maybe you ought to switch to wide receiver."

Billy put the beer on a table.

"Come on, Slick. One beer won't hurt you. Got to learn to relax those big muscles of yours."

Jerry walked over and grabbed him in a headlock. Billy shook loose and opened the Heineken. He walked over to another wall and stared at more photos of Jerry as chief head knocker for Atlanta and Carolina. Jerry snuck over behind the bar, bent down, and snorted a long line of coke off a mirror.

"Since when did the coach change his mind?"

"He wants me back soon as I get the form signed."

Jerry wiped the coke residue off his nose then checked himself in the mirror.

"What's your momma say about all this?"

Billy was silent. He was staring at a photo of Jerry in a clean Carolina blue uniform. He had a grimace on his face. It was one of those fake-looking poses set up by the photographer. Jerry walked up behind him, still rubbing the coke in his nose. The dope was starting to hit him good now.

“There I am in Carolina blue. Star linebacker for the University of North Carolina Tar Heels. You know in Chapel Hill, the sky isn't just blue, it's Carolina blue. It's a scientific fact. Got drafted by Atlanta one year to the day after that picture was taken.”

Billy rubbed his hand over the glass and the photo, as if he could somehow transfer himself into that beautiful clean Carolina blue uniform.

“I bet grandma and grandpa were proud.”

Jerry paused a moment and remembered his parents.

“Grandma Lucy called up everybody she knew and told them her son was going to play football in the NFL, the National Football League. Pops wanted me to play for Washington but he finally came around. Grandma even called up the preacher in the middle of the night to make sure he'd tell everybody at church on Sunday. Neither one of them ever got to see me play in the NFL. They both died that summer.”

Billy looked at another photo of Jerry in his Atlanta uniform. Jerry was catching a pass like a wide receiver.

“They saw you play in college, didn't they?”

Jerry took a long pull off his beer. He looked over on another wall at a photo of his parents. They were simple-looking people who looked like they'd led difficult lives.

“Pops did. He came to a game in Chapel Hill once. Only one game. Can you believe that? Grandma Lucy didn't like big crowds. She was scared to go to the stadium.”

Jerry swallowed hard as the post-nasal coke drip started moving down his throat. He got a catch in his voice, remembering something from the past. He took another swig of beer to cool the coke drain.

“Pops got all dressed up one Saturday in the fall. I went all the way down to Raleigh and got him a new suit. It was Homecoming. We were playing Virginia. I got a cab for him and everything, even had seats for him on the 50 yard line. I wanted him to feel special. Guess he kinda got lost when he got to the stadium. He was wandering around in the stands and couldn't find his seat. Some Carolina fraternity boys saw him and laughed at him--called him some names.”

“Names? What kind of names?”

Jerry looked at the beer bottle, considering. The coke was lighting up his brain in all the good places now. He wasn't in the mood to think about bad things in the past. Not at his glory wall anyway.

"Don't matter, just drunk and stupid frat boys. Football games are just another excuse to get drunk for most folks. The fat-fucks. That's what we called them. Little trade secret for you. Everybody in the stadium seems drunk when you play your first game--everybody except for us--the warriors--the Roman gladiators. You know you can smell the booze when you're on the field? The grass doesn't smell like grass anymore. It smells like booze. Everything smells like booze in the big stadiums. Football's just another excuse for the fat-fucks to get drunk."

Jerry seemed to be going off to his place. Billy had already moved over to the photo of Jerry's parents.

"What'd they call grandpa?"

Jerry kept staring at the photo of himself in Carolinablue. Billy called to him.

"Unk-- Unk."

Jerry snapped out of it then shook his head.

"Forget about it. Pops never went to another game. But he was proud of me. He was so proud. And I know he's looking down right now. And he's going to be just as proud of you as he was of me. Your daddy, too."

Billy looked in a case that had a framed magazine with Jerry on the cover. It was a local Atlanta magazine named *Hot Lanta*. Jerry was making a game-saving tackle on a 260-pound Dallas halfback. It was a nasty hit. The halfback and Jerry looked like two freight trains that had just collided on the tracks, but the angle was slightly favoring Jerry, keeping the halfback from scoring a touchdown. The halfback's face-mask was twisted and broken and his mouth guard was flying out of his mouth, with a string of saliva pearls following the mouth guard. The halfback's eyes were rolled back in his head, making him look as if the snot had been knocked out of him. It had been. What the photo didn't show was the aftermath of the hit. The halfback spent one week in the hospital and another week at home resting in bed. He played the next season but his career was essentially over. Jerry spent the next three days recuperating from the hit as well, but he never let anyone know that he was seeing double for three weeks, not even the trainers. Atlanta won the game and Jerry was awarded MVP for the game. Billy stared at the magazine cover, hypnotized.

"Bet it felt good, all those people cheering in that big stadium."

"Better than anything in this world. Pros were like night and day from college. Pros were so fast, they hit so hard, and they'd put your pecker so far down in the dirt you forgot you even had one."

Billy grinned. "Think I'd like to play pro ball for Carolina, maybe Tennessee."

Jerry smacked him.

"Expansion teams? Come on now, Slick. You gotta play for Atlanta like your Unk. Keep it all in the family. You got to promise me."

Billy shrugged. Jerry went over to another glass case, opened it, and pulled down his Atlanta jersey with the number 53 on it. It still had the dirt and grass stains from the game in which Jerry was awarded MVP. It was signed by the team and the coaches. "Jammer Jerr" was scribbled above the number 53. Billy touched the jersey reverently.

"Number 53. Jammer Jerr."

Jerry held it up to Billy.

"Put it on."

"I can't do that, Unk. That's your MVP jersey."

Jerry shoved it at him.

"I want you to have it."

Billy shook his head.

"You trying to bribe me or something?"

Jerry smiled.

"Hell yeah I'm trying to bribe you so when you get rich and famous you don't forget about your Unk. Me and you are gonna open up a combination car wash barbecue joint franchise for the whole southeast, maybe even all the way down into Texas. Teach those cowboys what real barbecue is all about. We'll call it Jerry and Billy's Carolina Barbecue Car Wash. You come in to get your car washed and get some ribs to take home while you wait. I've been thinking about this idea for a long time. I got some investors interested right now."

"What about Billy and Jerry's?"

Jerry grinned.

"I can go with that. We've just got to get you back in the game and that arm of yours will take care of everything else."

Billy started to put the jersey on.

"I think momma's just overreacting."

Jerry smiled.

“That's what mommas are for. She'll come around when you get back on the team and set some more records. Then State's gonna give you back your scholarship, they'll be begging for you to come back. You'll be set then, do a couple years at State, and the pros will pick you up like nothing ever happened. Injuries are part of the game. Just like a cold. You blow your nose and just push on through.”

Billy finally got the jersey on. Jerry smoothed it and adjusted the sleeves then pulled Billy over to a mirror.

“Perfect fit. I'm pulling some strings right now. You just watch, Slick. Why do you think they call me Jammer Jerr?”

“Can I hang at your crib a while?”

“Hang here?”

Billy hesitated.

“You know.”

Jerry arched his brow.

“You ain't talking about no wild parties now, are you?”

Billy shook his head.

“No way. I'm in training, I told you.”

Jerry smiled.

“Cause that's what I'm talking about. Just make sure they're 18 and over. Uncle Jerry don't need that kind of trouble.”

“Just me.”

Jerry pointed upstairs.

“Okay, I've got four extra bedrooms. Two with waterbeds. Take your pick. Sleep down here if you like. Game's on tonight. Dallas and Green Bay. I'm taking Dallas. How about you? Got five hundred on it.”

Billy shrugged. Jerry caught a glimpse of himself on the cover of the *Hot Lanta* magazine, crashing into the Dallas fullback. He suddenly got a faraway look on his face. Billy saw it come over him. He'd seen it before and usually it meant Jerry was mad about something. Billy backed up a step. Jerry's face was ashen. He was back at his place. That place this time was somewhere deep inside the photo on the magazine. Jerry was diving headfirst into the face mask of the Dallas fullback. It was a quick flash in Jerry's mind--the sounds, the smells, the tastes--the player's screams after he hit

the turf. It left Jerry staring dead into the wall. Billy looked worried. He stepped back then shook Jerry.

“Unk. Uncle Jerry. Unk.”

Jerry finally snapped out of it. Billy pulled out the consent form and put it in Jerry's face. Jerry didn't see the form at first.

“What?”

Jerry finally came around and focused on the form.

“What, something you want me to sign? Autograph for my own nephew?”

Billy pushed the form closer and swallowed hard.

“Consent form. I need you to sign as my guardian.”

Jerry took the form and studied it. Billy pointed to the signature line.

“All I need after you sign is the doctor's signature and I'm back playing.”

Jerry stared at the form. Billy watched him, worried. It seemed to take forever. Jerry glanced at him.

“Alright, want me to sign it Jammer Jerr?”

“Think you better use your real name.”

Jerry found a pen and quickly signed his name on the line for guardian. He handed the form back to Billy. Billy looked at the signature. He still had a worried look.

“What's wrong, Slick? I spell my name right?”

“What about the doctor?”

Jerry waved his hand as if he were waving a signal to one of his defensive ends.

“Don't worry. I know this doc over in Chapel Hill. Old buddy. He'll do anything I ask him. Leave the form on the counter. This doc can get you some good 'roids if you want.”

Billy processed the word then shook his head.

“Steroids? I ain't doing no steroids. No way. I'm playing clean.”

Jerry slipped back over toward the bar and motioned for Billy to come over. Billy approached warily as Jerry pulled open a drawer and dumped out the contents on top of the bar. Dozens of syringes scattered onto the counter. Billy stared at them.

“What's that?”

Jerry grinned.

“You work out today?”

Billy shrugged, his eyes still on the syringes.

“You hit the weights, run five miles, throw two hundred balls? You're in training, right? You got to show me something.”

Jerry reached under the bar and found a grocery bag. He gently placed it on the top of the bar.

“Open it.”

Billy moved closer and peered into the bag. It was full of pharmaceutical boxes, all stacked neatly. He pulled out a single box which was just like all the others. It had the logo for Ciba Pharmaceuticals on it. He read the words in small print.

“Dianabol. Meth-andro-steron-olone. Meth? You crazy, Unk?”

“D-bol. I use it. Everybody uses it. Best stuff on the planet to bulk up quick. I got ten bags under here. Two years supply.”

He pointed under the counter. There were nine identical grocery bags, all full of the drug boxes. Billy shook his head.

“I ain't sticking no needles in me.”

Jerry laughed.

“I got pills, too, but they're not as good as the juice. The juice is the real stuff. I get it from Mexico. They won't let the drug companies sell it here anymore. Grannies could bulk up on this shit and get jobs as pro wrestlers.”

Billy shook his head and moved away. Jerry grabbed his arm and pulled out a bottle of D-bol pills. He popped the lid and dropped two in his mouth. He chewed them quickly.

“Tastes like candy.”

He took Billy's hand and shook out one of the D-bol tablets.

“Take one of these every day. Shoot the juice every other day. That's the routine. Hit the gym every day, 3 hours minimum. And use free weights, not those fucking machines. Machines are for pussies, not football players. You've got to pump that iron like you own it, show it who's boss.”

Billy shook his head.

“I don't know, Unk.”

“Come on now. Stuff hasn't hurt me none. You want to play pro ball or be a fat-fuck? Anybody can be a fat-fuck. Takes a man to play pro ball. Pussies sit up in the stands and play with themselves.”

Billy swallowed hard, looking at the box and the needles.

“At least take the fucking pill. Damn, grandpas eat this shit like candy at the gym.”

Billy put the pill in his mouth but didn't swallow. He held it on his tongue as if he were about to eat a bug.

“Chew it up. There's things you got to do if you want to play pro ball. Just like you getting me to sign that form. Come on now, Slick. You got to want it bad, worse than bad.”

Billy chewed the pill. It tasted good, sweet, like grape cough syrup without much aftertaste. Jerry took a syringe, pulled off the plastic protector, then plunged it into the bottle of Dianabol. He held it up to the light and drew out 10cc of the clear liquid. He slid the syringe out of the bottle and grinned at Billy as he thumped out the air bubbles. Billy shook his head.

“I can't--”

Jerry laughed then yanked down his own pants and plunged the syringe into his butt. He smiled at the prick of pain, almost relishing it.

“Feels good. Feels like winning. You'll be fucking Superman by the time we get you to State next fall. More I think about this little headache of yours, the more I realize it might be the best thing ever happened. Know why? Because now your Unk's gonna train you like a fucking racehorse. Forget those flabby ass high school coaches.”

Jerry took another syringe and readied it with another 10cc dose of D-bol. He held it up to Billy's face. Billy backed away.

“I ain't doing that stuff.”

Jerry grabbed Billy, swung him over his leg, yanked his pants down then popped him quickly in the butt with the syringe. Billy stiffened to attention like a cartoon character as Jerry jerked the needle out of him. Billy jumped up and rubbed his butt.

“Damn, Unk, that shit burns.”

“Means you got a good one. You'll get to loving that burn.”

He took another syringe and loaded another shot. Billy backed up.

“Don't worry, this one's for me. In case the other one was a dud. Sometimes you get a dud with this Mexican shit. If it burns, it ain't a dud.”

He popped himself again in the other hip.

“Ahhhh--burned just right. Now get in the fucking weight room. I want two hours of free weights and then you're gonna run five miles with 25-pound dumbbells tied on each leg.”

“I'm tired.”

Billy stood there, still rubbing his butt from the shot. Jerry laughed at him.

“You wanna be a player or a fat-fuck?”

The doorbell rang.

“Go see who it is while I put this stuff away. And I don't want you sneaking any of this shit to your buddies on the team. They can get their own.”

Billy shrugged then headed upstairs to get the door. Jerry listened to the low tones of a man's voice as he checked his stash of D-bol. Billy came running back down the stairs.

“Somebody named ‘Kite.’”

“Kite?”

Jerry thought a moment. The name didn't register. Billy shrugged. Jerry headed upstairs to the door. When he got there, Nathan Abramowitz was standing there, smiling and drinking a Diet Pepsi with the sun ringing his balding head with its fray of remaining hair. Abramowitz was Jerry's former agent. Jerry was not happy to see him.

“Jammer Jerr, it's the kike in the Kraut car. How's my nigger in the cotton patch?”

Jerry stared at him. He wasn't in the mood to trade insults like the old days. Abramowitz took a swig of Diet Pepsi and kept smiling.

“Just wanted to check in on you, see how you're doing.”

Jerry didn't waste any time getting to the point.

“Who sent you?”

Abramowitz arched his eyebrows in mock surprise.

“Why would anybody send me? I was just in the neighborhood. I was driving down to Florida to see my mother. Every Jew sends his parents to live in Florida. You know I hate to fly. Got a brand new Mercedes. Breaking her in. Jews and Kraut cars. Go figure.”

“What do you want?”

“There's talk. I've been hearing it all the way up on 57th Street.”

“What kinda talk?”

“Was that Billy? Great looking kid, reminds me of you.”

Jerry started to close the door.

“I'm busy.”

Abramowitz put his foot in the door.

“I've been talking to some people and I think I can make a deal. We can do two years of junior college for Billy--bumfuck Texas somewhere. He doesn't even have to go to school. We'll fix all that

for him. Just show up for a few games. Then I can get him on with one of the shit teams--Jacksonville, Tampa Bay, Washington. He'll be in the cotton patch. He doesn't even have to play. He can retire and get a pension and be set before he's twenty-five. Everybody wins."

Jerry narrowed his eyes. Abramowitz smiled.

"I know the kid's good. Just like you. He's a linebacker, right?"

Jerry started to shut the door again. Abramowitz grabbed it hard.

"Look, Jerry. I set you up with those car washes. You've got a pretty good fucking deal. The NFL was very good to you. It's time you give a little bit of that love back."

"What the hell you know about any of it?"

"I'm an agent, Jerry. I make things happen. Football is entertainment. Let the fat-fucks get their rocks off thinking it's something else. It's a business. I grease the wheel."

Jerry grabbed him and hauled him over to his car then opened the door and threw him inside. Jerry slammed the door in his face. Abramowitz rolled down the window.

"I'm trying to make this thing easy on you, Jerr."

Jerry grabbed his necktie.

"What thing? I don't know what the fuck you're talking about."

"There will be others, Jerry. And they won't be as nice as me. Take the goddam deal."

He started the car and peeled out. Jerry watched the car disappear down the street. One of the nosy neighbor women had seen everything from her driveway across the street. Jerry stared at her and she quickly disappeared into her house.

Billy had watched it all from the window. As Jerry headed back into the house, Billy quickly climbed the stairs and went up to one of the bedrooms. It was unkempt and dirty like the rest of the house. Beer bottles were everywhere. A couple of used condoms were slapped over a trash can in the corner. A table was cluttered with photos of Jerry and his teammates--partying, hugging cheerleaders, playing golf with celebrities. Billy looked at other photos strewn all around the room, some on the floor, some hanging lopsided on the wall which had a hole in it where it looked like a fist or an elbow or maybe even somebody's head went through during a drunken brawl. Billy picked up a half-inflated football and fell back on the waterbed. He tossed the ball in the air, imagining himself as Jerry in those photos. He looked up at the mirrored ceiling and smiled at his reflection.

He noticed the wide-screen television and found the remote control and turned the television on. The news was on and the announcer quickly threw to Hannah Huckabee who was outside Hillside High School. A moment later, Ivy's face appeared on screen. Billy turned the volume down

and watched his mother. He didn't need to listen. He knew exactly what she was saying. He turned the television off and fell back on the bed and closed his eyes, dreaming of glory, dreaming about playing in the NFL like his uncle. His thoughts quickly changed to his mother. He was mad at her, but he felt bad that he was planning to move in with Jerry and not tell her. He heard a car door slam and looked out the window. Jerry's car was flying down the street. A pang of guilt came over Billy. He had to go tell his mother in person that he was moving out of her house and in with Jerry.

Back on Donohoe Street, Billy strolled up to his house tossing a football. Something looked wrong as he approached the house. As he got closer, he could see that the house had been toilet papered and egged. The word CHICKENSHIT was spray-painted on the door in crooked green letters. A pickup sped past. A high school kid leaned out and yelled at Billy then threw an egg at him. He ducked as it whipped by his head. He turned and watched the pickup disappear down the street in a cloud of smoke. As he got to the porch, Billy saw a small statue broken on the concrete. It was a lawn jockey that had been stolen from somewhere else and thrown at the house. He stepped over the plaster shard remnants of the lawn jockey then rubbed his fingers on the spray painted word on the house. The paint was dry. He didn't want his mother to see the word. He opened the door to get something to clean the paint off, but he heard a noise behind him. Ivy walked up. She was wearing a new Short Stuff's Barbecue uniform. She watched him. The uniform now had her slogan on it in snappy lettering: BEST BARBECUE IN CAROLINA AND THE US. She walked up slowly onto the porch. She was tired from working an extra shift to make up for the time she'd been missing at work.

"What happened here?"

Billy didn't bother to look up at her as he mumbled "Nothing." She saw the lawn jockey.

"What's that?"

He kicked a piece of the lawn jockey and tried to hide another shard of it under his foot.

"Nothing."

She gave him a long look.

"You made them mad."

Ivy nodded.

"Well I plan on making them madder. A lot madder."

"Why are you protesting at my high school? Nobody's ever gonna talk to me again."

She could now see his swollen eye.

"What happened to your face? Where were you last night?"

Billy laughed under his breath.

“Unk's. Slipped on a banana in his kitchen.”

Ivy tried to grab his face, but Billy pulled away.

“Yeah, those bananas have a way of just getting right under people's feet, don't they. You know what I told you about fighting.”

Billy shook his head.

“You ain't got to do this.”

“Do what?”

“Whatever you call it. Protest--cause trouble--whatever it is you think you're doing. I'm not staying here. I can't be seen around somebody like you.”

Ivy grabbed a piece of the lawn jockey and put it in his face. Billy shrugged. It didn't mean anything to him.

“Somebody like me? You telling me you can't be seen with your own momma? Now that's something.”

“Football is an American institution. You can't protest it. That's like protesting Kellogg's corn flakes.”

Ivy pushed the lawn jockey fragment closer to his face.

“Jim Crow was an institution. You want them to bring Jim Crow back?”

“Who's Jim Crow?”

“Oh, I see. Your generation has decided to forget all about the past. You're all Rap stars now. Basketball heroes. Football heroes. Hollywood movie stars. Well I remember Jim Crow. I remember my granddaddy and what Jim Crow did to him. It ripped out a piece of his soul.”

Ivy moved closer and tried to touch him, but shoved her away.

“All I want is for them to make football safer. If they can't, then they need to stop it. When there's a problem, people have to step up and speak out. That's how it works in America.”

He laughed.

“You work at Short Stuff's Barbecue. Since when did you become an expert on anything except barbecue sauce?”

She paused a moment and tried to hold back her anger.

“Since my boy almost got turned into a vegetable. That's when I became an expert. And I plan on becoming the world's greatest expert until they change things.”

He shook his head.

“Ain't no problem with football. The problem is you.”

She handed him another piece of the lawn jockey. He threw it down then jogged off down the street. She was about to call to him, but she knew it wouldn't do any good. She was tired. Her life wasn't getting any easier. Billy was out of her house and maybe even out of her life, at least for now.

14. Old Habits

Jerry drove around the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area, doing his usual routine of checking on his car washes. He had five car washes in Durham, three in Chapel Hill and four in Raleigh. He snagged a beer from a cooler he kept in the back seat and popped the top. He swerved the car and checked his rear-view mirror. He noticed a car was following. He turned at an intersection. The car kept following him. Jerry sped up then pulled up to a stoplight. A white limousine pulled up beside his car. The rear window rolled down slowly. A platinum blonde woman was looking at him. She looked to be about thirty-five, a professional woman. She smiled as if she wanted to say something to him. Jerry looked at her a long moment then floored it. He looked back in the rear-view mirror and the car was gone. He jerked his car over and took a long pull off his beer. He thought about the doctor's signature for Billy, then he thought about himself. Maybe he was the one who needed to go see a doctor. He hated doctors but something was wrong.

At N.C. State's Carter-Finley stadium, the rain was letting up. There was a hint of Carolina blue in the sky to the north, in the direction of Chapel Hill, perhaps proving that God was indeed a UNC Tarheel. Duke and N.C. State were playing their first match of the season. Tailgaters were out in full force, bands were playing, students were dressed-up rushing to get inside. Fans hurried along blowing trumpet-like horns that made vulgar hissing sounds. It was like a ritualistic sacrifice to the gods that was occurring simultaneously at over a hundred stadiums across America. Outside the gate, in the middle of the frenzy, Ivy held up her FOOTBALL IS HURTING OUR CHILDREN sign high and waved it around. People moved past, mostly ignoring her.

When she got tired of holding the sign, she tried to hand out flyers. Most of the people either laughed or dropped the flyers on the ground. Ivy didn't mind the jeers or the laughter. Her mind was on Billy. She repeated his name over and over. It had been almost two weeks since she'd seen him. He wouldn't answer the phone when she called. He was staying at Jerry's house, day and night. She thought about something her mother once told her. When you get older, you get scared because you think about all the shit in the past that went wrong. It was only the second time her mother had ever cursed in front of her. The other time was when Ivy told her she was marrying her first husband. She should've said "shit" to Ivy for a week to knock some sense into her for that mistake. Ivy didn't want to think about the past now--all that had gone wrong in her life. She wanted to think about the future--her son. She had to save him from the football trick and the lifestyle that Jerry was living. Maybe she could even save somebody else's son.

An air horn blasted next to Ivy's ear. She jerked back as a man snarled a "Fuck You" at her then shoved one of her flyers back in her face. Ivy picked up the flyer without reaction. She tried not to judge people, but it was hard not to. The way they moved and swarmed made them look like ants streaming toward a buzzing hive where something wicked was about to take place. The women were the queens, all dressed up for each other, competing for something--attention maybe--like harlots from the Bible. For some reason, a verse from Ecclesiastes kept coming to her mind: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity..."

A well-dressed woman with a handsome man on her arm stopped and took a flyer. The woman looked at Ivy quizzically.

"What's this about?"

Ivy's face lit up, hopeful that someone seemed interested in what she had to say.

"We're trying to tell people that football isn't safe for our children."

The woman screwed up her mouth, thought a long moment then turned to her husband.

"We? I don't see anybody else."

They both laughed loudly at the same time, so close in Ivy's face that she could smell the bourbon on their breath. Ivy put a smile back on her face and kept handing flyers to people who had no interest. Two policemen approached her. One was tall--too tall for his uniform. He seemed uncomfortable in it. Ivy put down her sign.

"Am I under arrest?"

The tall cop smiled.

"Just take it across the street, away from the stadium entrance."

Ivy gathered her poster and flyers and headed to the other side of the street. Midway across she saw a familiar face in the crowd that was moving quickly up the sidewalk--Billy's neurosurgeon, Dr. Pender. He was wearing full Duke blue regalia and was with several friends who were dressed the same. He saw Ivy and walked over quickly with a smile and a handshake from his small, soft hands.

"Mrs. Gotschall, how's your son?"

Ivy smiled and nodded. She didn't want to tell him the truth that she and Billy were having a hard time.

"Fine, thank you."

Dr. Pender glanced at Ivy's poster then motioned to his friends, almost as if he were apologizing for something.

"We're big Duke fans."

Ivy nodded in recognition of their dark blue and white outfits. There was a long pause. Dr. Pender didn't seem to know what else to say. His friends had already moved along with the rest of the crowd.

"I hope things work out for you. Let me know if there's anything else I can do for you."

He walked on, but Ivy followed him and handed him a flyer. He looked at it with a smile.

"You told me my boy shouldn't play football any more. What about these kids out here, the ones playing today?"

He looked at the flyer, twisting it nervously in his hands. Ivy held his gaze.

"What are you doing here? You're a doctor."

He searched for the words. He finally found something to say.

"I'm a Duke alumnus, undergrad and medical school. Guess it's hard to break old habits."

He started to move away, but Ivy grabbed his arm.

"How'd you like to go to work each day and have somebody slap your head around for a couple hours? How much brain surgery do you think you could do after that?"

She looked around at the people walking past. They were mostly white. Something seemed to come over her.

"Would you let your child play football on that field? Right here, right now, today?"

He stared at her, nervous. Ivy was trembling now, but it was because she was angry. She turned in a circle, calling out to people, looking at them, reaching out to them.

"All of you. What's wrong with you!"

People grimaced, putting their heads down as they moved past her. Most of them probably thought Ivy was a poor woman from the bad part of town, panhandling for money. Doctor Pender grabbed her arm.

"No need to cause a scene, Mrs. Gotschall."

She pushed him away.

"Those are children out there. Babies. You came here to watch them bust their heads. That's what they do, isn't it? Bust their heads together. Do you enjoy that?"

He took her by the shoulders, trying to calm her. She pulled away. He walked on quickly, disappearing into the crowd. She watched him a moment then walked away. She didn't want to look back at the stadium and the people, the ants swarming into the hive. She thought about something else from the Bible--the story of Lot's wife as she walked away from Sodom. Ivy didn't dare look back. She was afraid she might turn into a pillar of salt.

A silver-haired woman in her mid-sixties approached. Her name was Doris. She had kind eyes and held one of Ivy's flyers in her hand.

"I've been watching you."

Ivy was suspicious.

"Watching me what?"

Doris took her hand.

"I believe in what you're doing. A lot of people believe in it. If you want, I can help."

Ivy didn't understand. Doris smiled.

"There's a game next weekend. Clemson. I'll meet you right here." Ivy thought about it a moment then nodded.

"Okay."

Ivy walked on quickly, careful not to look back at the stadium.

15. Displaced People

At Sonny's, the local after-school hangout, jocks, cheerleaders, and high school kids goofed around and played loud music. Billy walked toward the order window to get a hamburger and a milkshake. Nearby, he saw Elisa with a couple of other cheerleaders. She waved and smiled. He walked over. The cheerleaders whispered quietly as Billy approached then got up and walked toward their car.

“Hey--”

Elisa smiled shyly.

“Hey--”

Billy reached out to touch her but she pulled back.

“Ain't seen you in a while.”

Billy could see some other kids laughing behind her. It looked as if they were laughing at him.

“What's so funny?”

Elisa turned back to the kids and shook her head.

“I don't know. Just joking around about something.”

Billy shuffled.

“Thought we could talk. I'm gonna be back on the team pretty soon. Got my papers signed.”

Elisa perked up.

“Really? When?”

“Not long.”

One of the cheerleaders called to Elisa.

“You ready? We need to go practice those new moves.”

Elisa nodded to the girl then shrugged.

“Sorry, Billy. Gotta go.”

She tapped him on the arm then ran and got into the car with the cheerleaders. They drove away, leaving Billy standing alone. He could hear them laughing as the car screeched out of the parking lot and headed down the street. The other kids kept watching him with funny looks on their faces. A couple of the boys were giggling. Billy wasn't hungry anymore. He headed off down the street. Later that afternoon, Billy walked into a convenience store near Jerry's house to buy beer with a fake ID. The clerk looked at the ID then at Billy's face.

“You’re that boy on TV, ain’t ya?”

Billy shook his head.

“See a boy, give him a dollar.”

“One who got hurt. Your momma’s running her mouth off about football.”

Billy tried not to listen to what the man was saying.

“Want my opinion, she’s the one needs her head examined. If she had her way, players would be running around with giant foam helmets like a bunch of cartoon characters. Maybe they could put big balloons on their heads.”

He laughed. Billy handed him a bill and walked toward the exit.

“Hey, wait, you ain’t old enough to buy beer.”

In the woods behind Jerry’s house, Billy did push-ups and ran in place, as if he were getting pumped up for a game. He pulled out the consent form. He had tried forging the doctor’s signature, but the bright light of day showed the imperfections in his work. The lines looked crooked and jagged. It was an obvious forgery. He almost tore up the form, but thought again then stuffed it back in his pocket. He ran in place again, but got winded and fell to the ground. He stared up at the sky. Birds were headed south in flocks, forming dark patches against the blue sky. The trees were losing their leaves now. It would be winter soon. He pulled a beer out of the bag, broke it off the plastic ring, and popped the top. It spewed for a few seconds then he took a long sip. He swallowed slowly. It tasted good to him. He liked the taste of beer, especially the stronger German beers. He heard a car door slam. He looked through the trees and saw two figures move into Jerry’s house. It looked like two women, but he wasn’t sure. He walked toward the house to get a better look. He peeked around the front. A strange car was parked at the curb. It looked out of place in the neighborhood. One of the tires was a spare. The white paint was peeling off in large patches, revealing a gray primer coat.

At the doctor’s office in Chapel Hill, Jerry sat in the examining room awaiting the test results. Like most men who were moving toward middle age, he hated going to the doctor. But Dr. Wayne Fugate wasn’t just any doctor. He was an athlete’s doctor--a good ole boy who was an athlete’s best friend when they needed pain pills or pep pills or anxiety pills or steroids or any other goodies that the pharmaceutical industry had to offer. Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill had a lot of ex-athletes and there were at one time a lot of doctors like Dr. Fugate--Dr. F.G.--Dr. Feel Good. There were dozens of drug companies in the Research Triangle Park and the drug samples flowed as freely as Jack Daniels at a frat party. Everybody and their brother worked as a drug company sales rep. If you didn’t know a sales rep, a doctor like Dr. Fugate would keep you up with the latest that medical

science had to offer, the latest pharmaceutical fads. The DEA had finally cracked down on most of the “feel-good” doctors and run them out of town, but Dr. Wayne Fugate was quite the artful dodger. Back when things started to heat up, he'd done his share of skipping around the Carolinas, Georgia, and Florida. He even spent some time out in California, waiting for things to cool down for him in Chapel Hill. In California, he hung around Esalen in Big Sur, just below Monterey. At Esalen, the good doctor peddled *medicinals* to middle-aged, well-heeled, white ladies who took their clothes off Henry Miller-style after attending their somatic psychotherapy sessions or whatever was in fashion, then went for a soak in the Esalen hot tubs overlooking the Pacific. The waters and the mumbo-jumbo were supposed to purge them of their burdens--their sins--which were mostly low-boil white lady sins such as greed and envy and pride and the guilt they carried for abandoning their make-the-world-a-better place fantasy and marrying a nouveau-riche asshole for his money. Like all forms of charlatanism, the snake oil bullshit never lasted for long--usually to just over the Monterey County line--when the women realized that youth and beauty and love would never visit them again, no matter what secret gesticulations or chants or confessions they made to the sky. Meanwhile, the husbands sat in the hot tubs, gazing through the sad flesh out toward the Pacific sunset, dreaming of *Esselen* Indian nymphets rising naked and glistening out of the emerald sea. The Esselen people were long gone, obliterated by greed's silent vanguard--smallpox. Still, conjuring the ancients was often attempted at Esalen, if only to appease the restless spirit of the bored, flabby white people. Dr. Fugate entered and washed his hands at the sink. He looked like a roadie for the Grateful Dead.

“Jerr, been a while. How you been?”

Jerry shrugged. He was worried about the test results--the “brain” tests which he had been dreading. The good doctor sat at a computer and started typing.

“How many years you play football?”

Jerry thought a moment, distracted by the doctor's array of beads and talismen that he still wore on various parts of his body.

“Nine in the NFL, four in college. High school--five I guess if you include junior high. Pee-Wee about three or so.”

Dr. Fugate kept typing on the computer then looked at Jerry.

“Over twenty years of football. Linebacker, right? Jammer Jerr. How could I forget?”

The doctor smiled and motioned him over then pointed to a row of images on the computer screen, showing Jerry's brain sliced and diced at different angles and planes--sagittal, transverse, coronal.

“You're showing signs of degradation in the hippocampus and the medial temporal lobe. You also have elevated levels of p-tyrosine and lysine plus unusual glutamine levels.”

The medical terms flew over Jerry's head. He stared at the doctor's beads and other trinkets that seemed to appear then reappear on different parts of his body.

“What's all that?”

“Markers for dementia.”

Jerry shook his head.

“Dementia? You mean like some old man in a nursing home? I'm only forty-four years old. I'm not ready for Sunnyside.”

Dr. Fugate smiled in his hippie way.

“It's called Early Onset Dementia. EOD. It's not full-blown.”

“Am I gonna lose my mind?”

Dr. Fugate shrugged.

“So this stuff is true?”

“What stuff?”

“Football players, their heads getting messed up.”

The doctor took a deep breath and leaned back.

“Jerry, if you bang your head against a wall for over twenty years, there have to be some adverse effects. You don't get a free pass just because the rest of your body is in great shape. Your brain is where you live. It's a fragile organ. Think of it like an egg. Your skull is the shell. That egg gets scrambled--the pieces get moved around. Worst part, it's cumulative.”

Jerry put his head in his hands, repeating “cumulative” to himself.

“That's why I laugh sometimes then cry others?”

“It's called Pseudo-bulbar Affect. PBA. It's a neurologic disorder characterized by involuntary crying or uncontrollable episodes of crying and laughing. PBA occurs secondary to neurologic disease or brain injury. The episodes may also be mood-incongruent. You might laugh uncontrollably when angry or frustrated.”

“Why didn't they tell us about all this?”

“Who?”

“The NFL--Atlanta--the University of North Carolina--the coaches. They knew about this all along, didn't they?”

Dr. Fugate shrugged.

“I can't answer those questions. The research is just starting to come in now. A few years from now and they'll shut down your kind of football.”

“Any pills I can take?”

Dr. Fugate shrugged. Jerry stared at one of the trinkets the good doctor wore around his neck. It looked like a shrunken head.

“What about some of that California juju stuff? You know--”

“This is for real, Jerr. The tests also show cocaine, amphetamines, and anabolic steroids in your body. Using drugs will only make things worse. You need to take care of yourself and have a yearly MRI. The one we did today and the other tests will be your baseline and we'll gauge your progress from there. Okay?”

Jerry stared at him a long moment then nodded.

“No more playing around like in the old days. I'm trying to save your life now.”

Dr. Fugate smiled and patted Jerry on the shoulder then walked out. Jerry looked around the room as he got dressed. There was a University of North Carolina football schedule above the sink, with a photo showing the current player roster. He studied the team photo and picked out his number, Number 53. He was a good-looking black kid with a beaming smile, proud to be a UNC Tarheel. Jerry remembered the day he told his father and mother he made the UNC team, how happy they were. His father walked on air for a year. Jerry studied the photo. Number 53 in the photo looked a lot like him, so full of hope and so happy. A thought flashed through Jerry's mind. Should he go over to the Carolina athletic dorm, find Number 53, and tell him what the doctor just told him? Maybe he should go tell the whole Carolina team what the doctor just told him. Maybe he should he go burn the whole fucking place down. Then he thought about Billy.

"Fuck," he whispered to himself.

He sat there, staring at the photo of the team. The more he thought about it, the more he realized the whole business of football was fucked up. This was something he'd known for a long time as an abstraction, but now it was real. He was the one who was fucked now. The whistle was blowing for him. He looked out the window. A row of crows sat on a telephone wire, looking down onto the street. In the distance, he could see the UNC campus up on the hill with its Georgian style bricks. They were streaked with dark stains from the gray drizzle of rain that wept down the walls. On the wire, one crow sat away from the others as if it had been ostracized from the group. It seemed to be looking at Jerry, watching him. It seemed so quick, so simple. All those years condensed into a couple of sentences. The thing he'd devoted his life to had turned on him like a rabid animal. The ones who ran the show knew it all along. He pulled out a vial of coke and did a quick line. He looked back out the window. The crows were gone except for the lone crow that was watching him, cawing. He checked his reflection in the mirror and brushed his teeth with the coke residue. Tears were rolling down his cheeks, but his face wasn't crying. It was laughing. On the inside he was dead.

"Fuck it," he said to himself then headed out the door.

Billy walked around to the back door of Jerry's house and turned the knob. He'd drank four of the beers and had a good buzz going. The door was open. He entered slowly, shook the rain off his New York Jets hat, then shut the door quietly. He entered the rec room. He could hear laughter upstairs. He slowly made his way past the bar and up the stairway toward the living room. He stopped on the stoop. He could see two women sitting at Jerry's kitchen table. He recognized one of them immediately. It was Nancy, the "cheerleader" with the lost panties. She was with another woman whose name was Janet. They were smoking crack from a small green pipe. Janet looked rougher than Nancy, skinny as a rail with big pop eyes and skin that was mottled and rough, acetic compared to Nancy's sweet demeanor. She wore a tee-shirt that showed a kitty cat squeezed into a bottle with the caption, "Happiness Is A Tight Pussy."

Nancy looked up and saw Billy. She didn't bother to put the crack pipe down as she hit the cocaine rock with the flame from her lighter, making it sizzle and crackle and then vaporize. She sucked the dope cloud into her lungs and held it then released it toward Billy.

"Oh, hey, Jerry said we could come over. Just having a little party."

She grinned at Janet.

"This here's Payless."

Billy didn't answer. He watched them warily. Nancy waved her arm for him to move closer.

“Jerry ain't here right now. Come on over here. This here is Janet. Payless is a football player. I told him once he made pro, I'd call him by his real name. Janet loves football players, don't you?”

“Hell yeah.”

Nancy passed the crack pipe to Janet who immediately began to load it up with a cream-colored oval rock. Janet held out the crack pipe to Billy.

“Wanna hit?”

He shook his head. Nancy stood up. The cocaine was soaring through her brain good and hard now. Her nostrils flared and her eyes blazed wide. She stomped her silver stiletto heel on the kitchen floor, making a small black dent on the linoleum.

“Get your motherfuckin' black ass over here and take a hit, goddammit.”

Janet giggled a “Hell yeah” then lit the rock and hit the crack pipe with a juicy draw, buying Billy some time. He reluctantly moved closer. Janet exhaled the smoke in a translucent gray jet toward his face then held out the pipe to him. He stared at it. Nancy snarled.

“What, you too good for us?”

Billy shuffled, still looking at the pipe.

“I'm in training--”

Janet cackled as she recognized Billy.

“You that kid with the busted up head I seen on the TV. Your momma's trying to stop everybody from playing football because of you. She is one dumb bitch to think she gone do something about football. Football is a fact.”

Billy glared at her.

“Don't call my momma a bitch.”

“I don't know your momma so I'll call your momma whatever the fuck I want,” she snapped.

He looked at Nancy.

“I thought you were a cheerleader.”

Nancy laughed loud. Janet giggled as she hit the crack pipe again, trying to hold the dope inside her. Her giggle made her sound like her insides were made of jello. Nancy smiled at Billy.

“Cheerleader? Yeah, I'm a fuckin' cheerleader.”

Janet backed her up with more giggles.

“Oh hell yeah, bitch, you are my favorite cheerleader. Tell him what you cheer for.”

Nancy moved closer to Billy.

“Okay, here’s what I cheer for, Payless. I cheer for football players, I cheer for basketball players, I cheer for lacrosse players, I cheer for whatever sport you got. I’ll even cheer for a goddam golf player.”

Janet giggled again, then exploded in a spew of smoke and spittle as she bent over laughing. Nancy smacked her.

“What’s so goddam funny?”

Janet righted herself.

“Think they call them golfers. And golfers is some goddam kinky-ass motherfuckers what they like to do with their putters and shit.”

Nancy stood up on her chair, balancing herself. Janet looked at her like she was crazy.

“Get down off there. What the fuck you doin', bitch?”

“Gonna cheer for Payless.”

Nancy shot her the finger then pulled up her dress and spun around and shook her ass in Billy’s face like a cheerleader.

“Quarter--dime--nickel--penny--this here pussy's good as any.”

Janet slapped Nancy’s ass hard.

“Where you been? That ain’t how it goes, bitch. It goes like this. Listen now.”

Janet got on her chair and did the exact same motions Nancy had just done, pulling her dress up and spinning her ass around to Billy. She made it a point to do her cheer much more slowly than Nancy.

“Quarter--dime--nickel--penny--nigger pussy's good as any.”

Nancy smacked Janet’s ass then slid down off the chair and shimmied up close to Billy.

“And I got the best thing in the world to cheer about. What I got, Payless, you see--what I got, it's called--now listen close, 'cause I don't want you to miss what I got to say.”

Nancy bit Billy's earlobe.

“See, what I got to cheer about, Payless, what I got is called hot, nappy, sweet, juicy, ready-to-lick, ready-to-fuck--black pussy. Whatcha say, Payless?”

Billy swallowed hard.

“Me and Janet here are willing to give you all the cheering you can handle, Payless. We can start right now if you want.”

Billy tried to shove her away, but Nancy took him by the neck and pulled off his New York Jets hat and threw it on the floor. She rubbed her hands all around his head.

“This head don’t look messed up to me. Whatcha think, Janet?”

Janet shrugged, busily fishing into a baggie which was full of a dozen or so crack rocks. Billy grabbed his hat off the floor and put it back on. Nancy pulled back.

“Oh, I see. You done took a liking to the white pussy.”

Janet cackled.

“Hell yeah. Put some white pussy in front of a nigger and he think he's seen Jesus.”

Nancy pulled Billy’s face closer.

“White pussy's just another trick on niggers. Ain't you know that, Payless?”

Nancy leaned back in the chair, spread her legs wide then pulled her dress up to her waist, revealing a thick black curly matte with a glistening salmon-colored finger of flesh peeking out.

“Get down here and eat some chocolate pussy. Then you gone eat hers.”

She smacked Janet’s leg.

“Spread your legs.”

“I ain’t spreadin’ nothing. I got my nature.”

“Well then show him them big titties of yours.”

Nancy yanked Janet’s tee-shirt up to her neck, revealing dark silver-dollar sized areola. Nancy grabbed Janet’s nipples and twisted them around. Janet giggled. Nancy smiled at Billy.

“Whatcha think now, Payless?”

Billy tried to keep his eyes on Nancy’s face. Janet smiled at Billy.

“It's all pink on the inside, Payless.”

He shook his head. Nancy smacked him.

“What! Black pussy ain’t good enough for you? You been charmed, ain’t you? Charmed by the white pussy. That white girl charm your snake with her tight white pussy? It better than black pussy?”

Janet laughed then grabbed Nancy’s legs and tried to push them together.

“I think he’s like them old school niggers what don’t eat pussy. Leave him alone. He ain’t got no sense. Let’s get outta here before Jerry comes back. He don’t like my ass.”

Janet looked Billy up and down then shook her head.

“Another football nigger. You think you so special? Ain’t you heard? White people took their kids out of football and left the cotton picking and head busting to the niggers.”

Nancy smacked her.

“Let the boy alone. He’s gone be a big star someday and come back here and buy us both brand new cars. Mercedes Benz convertibles. Ain’t that right, Payless. Mine’s gone be white. What color you want?”

Janet put a finger in Nancy’s face then moved closer to Billy.

“I ain’t finished. What he’s gone do is make more money for the white man. Nigger ain’t no president of no company. Nigger ain’t run no Google dot-com. Nigger ain’t no Wall Street banker. Nigger ain’t own no football team. Nigger ain’t run no college. Nigger still picking cotton and looking behind his goddam back.”

Billy grabbed his hat.

“What about the president--he pick cotton?”

Janet laughed.

“He’s white as a Kotex. That Uncle Tom sends niggers to kill Arabs so white people can drive big cars and fly around on big airplanes.”

Janet snatched Billy’s hat off his head and put it on her head. Nancy held up the bag of crack rocks.

“And Uncle Tom makes sure we got plenty of this good CIA dope. There’s more niggers on CIA dope in Washington D.C. than anywhere else in the world. That’s how they keep us down.”

Billy grabbed his hat from Nancy.

“You’re the one keeping yourself down.”

Janet’s mouth flew open.

“Oh shit--”

Billy turned to leave, but Nancy reached her legs out and snagged Billy. She clenched him tight, pulling him closer. He resisted, but her muscular legs were as strong as a fullback.

“Thing you didn’t see while that little white pussy was charming your snake was she had her hand in your wallet. And now she’s just waiting to get that football money and when she does, she’s gonna drop your ass and be gone on to the next snake to charm.”

Janet pulled her back. Billy tried to break free, but Nancy maintained her clutch on him.

“Get your head down here between my legs.”

Billy struggled to get loose. Janet tried to get a hold on him but he pushed her away, knocking her into the kitchen table. She reached in her purse and pulled out a .22 pistol and put it to his head.

“You heard her.”

Billy saw the gun and quit struggling.

“You’re crazy--”

Janet put the gun to his head and pushed him down between Nancy’s legs.

“Hell yeah, we crazy. Now eat some pussy.”

Nancy took the gun from Janet as Billy bent down in front of her. She rubbed the gun around his head which was now less than a foot away from her crotch.

“This is America, Payless. Somebody’s gone always have their hand in your back pocket, especially white pussy. White pussy loves money more than life itself, Payless. You look up the word money in the dictionary and there’s gone be white pussy spread out wide open beside it. Quicker you learn that better off you gone be, else you just another tricked nigger like all the rest of them. Go on, get your face in between my legs.”

She spread her legs wider and grabbed the back of his head. The front door slammed. Jerry was suddenly walking toward them, soaking wet. Water dripped down his face onto the top of his shirt, making his neck and shoulder muscles bulge out in long striations. He looked huge. Nancy slid the .22 pistol between her breasts but it fell out and hit the floor.

POP!

The .22 discharged. The bullet struck a photo of Jerry and a cheerleader, spinning it sideways on the shelf. The bullet continued into the wall, making a tiny hole. Janet hid the crack pipe and grabbed the crack and stuffed it in her purse. Jerry walked up and picked up the .22. Janet gulped down an “Oh shit” to herself.

Nancy smiled at Jerry, trying to act like nothing was going on. Jerry surveyed the room.

“What’s this?”

Everyone was silent. Janet started to giggle. Jerry jerked Billy up.

“What the fuck you doing with him? He’s a goddam pro football player. He’s a star.”

Nancy kept her smile on. Janet put her head down and quietly headed for the front door. Jerry grabbed her. He looked at Billy.

“Ain’t nothing wrong, Unk.”

Billy stumbled away, almost falling down the small flight of stairs that led to the front door, then ran out. Nancy yelled at him.

“You change your mind, Payless, let us know.”

Jerry glared at the women.

“Get the fuck out of here.”

16. Snick and Snickers Bars

The next Saturday at Carter-Finley stadium in Raleigh, N.C. State was hosting Clemson. Outside the stadium gate, Clemson fans walked past adorned in their characteristic orange tiger paw tats. Some of the Clemson fans had painted themselves completely orange to show their devotion to their beloved Tigers.

Doris had brought a dozen friends--men, women, and children. The children were full of energy, running in and out of people as they made their way toward the stadium. Doris and the volunteers carried boxes full of flyers that read, FOOTBALL IS HURTING OUR CHILDREN. Doris approached Ivy with a huge smile, wearing a bright yellow tee-shirt with the same slogan on it.

“My brother-in-law owns a copy shop.”

She handed Ivy a blue tee-shirt.

“Figured blue would look good on you.”

Ivy nodded.

“My favorite color.”

Later, the ground was littered with flyers, but the small group of people continued to pass out more flyers. Ivy took a break and sat down by the gate. She seemed frustrated as she looked at the flyers blowing around on the ground and getting stuck in the chain-link fence. Doris walked up and touched her hand.

“Nothing good is ever easy.”

A little girl ran up and picked up a handful of flyers then handed them to Ivy. The child smiled and started handing out flyers to people. Ivy couldn't resist the child's enthusiasm. She got up but she was still discouraged. Doris could see it in her face.

“Maybe we should go to another game. There's one up in Durham--Shaw versus Liberty University.”

Ivy thought about it then nodded. She knew that Shaw was a black college and Liberty was a Christian school from Virginia. Maybe things would go better with their fans.

Later that afternoon, Ivy stood outside the gate at the Durham County Memorial Stadium in downtown Durham, which is where Shaw played its home games. She waved her sign high and smiled at the people. Doris and the others hadn't shown up yet. She felt alone without Doris and the strange assortment of people she had assembled. Maybe they wouldn't show up. Ivy wasn't going to let that stop her. The students and fans at the Shaw-Liberty game seemed less aggressive. They

smiled and welcomed Ivy, although only a few people paid any attention to the flyers. Shaw University was historically a black college and had been instrumental in Civil Rights during the sixties. It sent a busload of students to Greensboro for the sit-in at the Woolworth's lunch counter. Shaw was considered the cradle of African-American colleges in North Carolina. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (*Snick*) was founded at Shaw in 1960 by a group of student activists. Snick came to prominence during the Civil Rights movement in the sixties. Doris finally walked up carrying a couple of boxes of flyers and her own sign. She was alone and looked tired.

"Sorry, my helpers sort of disappeared on me."

Ivy shrugged. Doris took out a handful of flyers and handed some to a couple of students as they walked past. The students took the flyers and thanked her. Doris smiled at Ivy.

"They seem nicer here."

Ivy nodded.

"Maybe we're making progress," Doris said.

"I don't know," Ivy said dejectedly.

Doris perked up. "Did you know Snick started at Shaw?"

Ivy shrugged. She didn't care for a history lesson right now. Doris kept talking.

"You know, the SNCC--it was called Snick. It was a big part of the Civil Rights movement."

"Before my time," Ivy smiled.

"I was a Yippie."

Ivy shook her head.

"You mean hippie, don't you?"

Doris laughed.

"No, the Yippies were started by Abbie Hoffman. Before that, he was involved with Snick. He was an anti-war activist. He used a lot of theatrical antics to get his point across. He was a joker. Maybe we could do the same."

Ivy shook her head again. She didn't have any idea what Doris was talking about. Doris stood there, pondering. Ivy could tell Doris was getting some idea in her head. Ivy wasn't sure she wanted to hear it.

"We could paint ourselves blue. Or maybe dress up like aliens."

Ivy frowned.

"I don't know. I'm not much for stuff like that."

Doris looked on the ground and saw a candy wrapper. She picked it up and unfurled the paper. It was a Snickers bar. Her eyes lit up.

“I’ve got it. We’ll attach Snickers bars to our clothes and when people grab one, we’ll stick a flyer in their hands.”

Ivy looked at her like she was crazy.

“You have to use whatever works to get your point across. Just imagine what people will think when they see the two of us standing here covered in Snickers bars. It’ll be a reference back to Snick.”

Ivy kept staring at Doris then suddenly burst out laughing.

“That’s the craziest thing I ever heard.”

“I know,” Doris said.

A few hours later, they were back at the stadium, waiting to hand out flyers as the game let out. Both women were covered head-to-toe in Snickers bars. Each bar was attached with a skinny strip of gray duct tape. They kept looking at each other and laughing. The fans began to filter out of the stadium. Shaw had won the game by 21 points. Doris began to call out.

“Snickers bars. Get your free Snickers bars.”

Ivy kept laughing then joined her.

“Snickers bars. Get your free Snickers bars.”

Ivy watched the fans walk past, no more interested in them than before the Snickers bars. She saw a tee-shirt that had “Love Thy Neighbor” written on it. She remembered the Bible verse from Sunday School when she was a girl. It was from the book of Mark. Another fan had a shirt with “JOHN 3:16” written all over it. It was the verse about God giving His son Jesus to save the world. She thought about the mothers handing over their sons to the football system. She thought about how she had handed her own son over to the football system and what she’d gotten back. An injured child, both physically and emotionally. She watched the people. She thought about how funny it seemed that Christians were at a football game. The more she pondered it, the harder it was to understand. Why did Christian schools even have football teams? If all those Christians really loved their neighbors, then why were they sitting in a stadium and cheering like Romans for children to bang their heads against each other. It didn’t make any sense to her. Christians were supposed to be different, to be a light to the world. What would Jesus say about this kind of violence, especially now that people were beginning to understand just how dangerous football was? She didn’t have an answer to all the questions that were swirling in her mind now. She kept handing out flyers and Snickers bars.

17. Time Out for the Dead Chick Flick Network

I'm starting to have my doubts about finishing this thing. I'm trying to concentrate, but my mind is wandering like a sex offender's first day out of the pen when he hits the Google porno-net. (Sex-offender to himself: "Fuck, I just did 5 years and Google gets rich off this shit. I'm going to go to work for Google.")

To make things worse, Mr. E.P. Rose keeps calling me up and asking me dumb questions. I decided to try and watch television (there was a playoff game on), thinking it might help me keep going, but my cable is out so I have to watch television the old fashioned way, with an antenna. They call it digital air television or just DTV. It's government mule TV, Uncle Sam's venture into the entertainment industry. It took me forever to figure out how it works. It's not like the old days when television channels had numbers like 2, 3, or 4. Digital television has numbers and dots and dashes that go on forever and when you punch them in, they don't go to the channel you want. The government mule DTV is full of PBS shows for children and adults, plus a lot of channels that show nothing but chick flicks. The PBS shows are full of cadaverous gurus who tell housewives how to lose weight, get right with some kind of god that they can choose from the PBS guru's god list, save money for retirement, and of course, rearrange their Crate & Barrel furniture using some bullshit thing from China or Japan called *jeng shui*. Talk about creepy, scary television. They don't need late night horror movies with PBS. No wonder the generation of kids who grew up with PBS are so fucked up, watching Mr. Rogers and Big Bird and then graduating to shows that tell you that you're okay if you just pick from one of the PBS gods and then go rearrange your Crate & Barrel junk and of course, write a fat check to PBS so it can keep spewing shit into the government mule DTV airwaves. But worse than PBS are the chick flicks. There are networks and networks full of chick flicks. Some are funny chick flick networks, and some are not-so-funny chick flick networks. On this one network, the one I call the *Dead Chick Flick Network*, they only show movies where the chick ends up dead in the end. Always. Most of the time she's dead because she keeps fucking around with some cocksucker boyfriend or husband who the girl knew all along was going to do something terrible to her. I thought women had been liberated back in the seventies, or the dark ages somewhere, and were onto these cocksuckers and all their cocksucking, chick killing tricks. I thought they didn't have to put up with bullshit from these assholes anymore. I thought that colleges (universities, if you prefer) had taught them to go off and live on their own in the woods or something. But the women never learn in these movies. Maybe it's because a lot of times the cocksucker who's going to kill them looks a lot like Richard Gere. And a lot of times, the cocksucker

is Richard Gere. Richard Gere made a ton of Dead Chick Flick movies. The women always seem more worried about rearranging their furniture in these movies than the cocksucker (Richard Gere) who is plotting to kill them with a giant fucking butcher knife from Crate & Barrel. Fuck. I thought we'd moved way past this shit by now, but here I am, watching the government mule DTV because my cable is out, and the government mule DTV is chock full of Dead Chick Flick movies that show these crazy chick slicer-and-dicer movies over and over, day and night. They never stop running them. It's 24 hours of sliced-and-diced-up chicks, courtesy of the government mule DTV. And these Dead Chick Flick movies are all written by chicks who I'm sure, at one time, claimed that they'd been liberated and would never put up with these chick slicer-and-dicer fuckers, even if they do look like Richard Gere (back when he was the good-looking Richard Gere). And I'm sure all the "womyn" writers who wrote these Dead Chick Flick movies went to one of the Seven Sisters colleges (universities, if you prefer), where they were warned daily about Richard Gere types and their chick slicer-dicer ways. And the commercials in these Dead Chick Flick movies are chock full of arm hair removal products or online shoe ordering or some other kind of chick *stuff* porn. I never realized that women had such hairy arms or that they needed so many pairs of shoes. The rest of the world seems to be trying to find food and water and maybe have some hope that men with clubs won't show up in the middle of the night and haul their asses off to the gulag or worse, but in America, there's a horrible epidemic of shoeless women with hairy arms.

Thing is, I like the Dead Chick Flick movies. I really do. I'll watch the same one over and over. I'm always rooting for the chick, hoping she'll figure out just what an asshole the Richard Gere asshole is and leave him and all her Crate & Barrel shit and run off into the woods and eat tree bark with wood nymphs. But she never does, it's always the same outcome. Then it dawned on me why women keep watching these movies and why there are so many of these goddam Dead Chick Flick movies. Hope.

Hope that there's something in these movies that will tell the woman watching them when it's time to leave the asshole that she's putting up with right now, even though her asshole dude probably doesn't look anything like Richard Gere. You know the kind of asshole. Most men, really. He drinks beer, watches Johnny Depp movies, loves to watch football egg busting, surfs porn while you lie in bed sleeping (hopefully you're not dreaming about Crate & Barrel, but that's your business). He says he loves you, but you know he'd shove your flabby ass in front of the Express Train for just a slice of that 18-year-old with the nose ring and the low-cut jeans showing her thong who makes his espresso at your favorite Starbucks.

Sometimes when I'm watching these Dead Chick Flick movies, I yell at the chick and tell her to go live in the goddam woods with elves and wood nymphs. Just leave the Richard Gere fucker and

stop worrying about your goddam Crate & Barrel bedroom suite and the Lexus with gold chrome trim the fucker gave you for your birthday, because he's going to bash in your head then chop you up in the bathtub three scenes from now. My advice never works. Never. I always end up shaking my head, sad for the chick as the Richard Gere chick slicer-and-dicer dumps her body in the woods. I will say one thing for the chicks in these movies. It's a lot quicker for them than football players like me. We wake up one day and realize that we've been royally fucked by everybody, except our eggs are so scrambled that we don't really understand what has happened to us. We're fucking old men way before our time, senile as a Crate & Barrel bread board, not much better off than those poor Dead Chick Flick movie chicks.

I discussed these observations with Mr. E.P. Rose in a phone call. Mr. E.P. Rose told me I should take a writing class and try to work this into my story. After all, he said, your story is not just about Billy and Jerry and Ivy. It's about a lot of things that are wrong in our society. He said the writing class might be helpful for you to learn some writing craft. I sighed and then he paused for a moment with some sort of a brain fart and then he warned me that most writing classes are group therapy for fuckwads (his word) looking for confirmation that their shitty prose is worth something more than the 150 milligrams of caffeine from the Starbucks espresso made by the 18-year-old girl with the thong that helped the writer create the black smudges on the page that are supposed to pass for creative writing. He mentioned something about a writer named Flannery O'Connor, who, when asked about writing programs, said something like, "writing programs don't stifle enough writers." I'm not sure what that's all about, stifling writers and all. I'm not quite sure what the fuck "stifle" even means. I was too afraid to Google it, since I thought Google might throw some weird new kind of porn in my face. I have enough to worry about with this book. I don't have time to try and understand some new way people have figured out to fuck each other and get off besides the old fashioned way that seemed to work for a long time. You might remember it if you grew up before the Google porn monopoly machine came along. It's called sticking a penis into a vagina.

Mr. E.P. Rose went on to say that writing is hard, lonely work with no guarantee of anything except more loneliness and more hard work to try and fix what the people in your writing group told you was wrong with your writing. But, of course, you didn't listen to them until you read your stuff on a beach or in a lonely motel room while drinking cheap wine or green fairy booze and realized that they were right all along. Mr. E.P. Rose told me that writers could be grouped into two categories: dipshits and assholes. The dipshits don't have any business writing. Even signing their name to a birthday card presents a challenge for them. The assholes have some ability, not much. And usually, someone such as their mother has told them to continue the pursuit of writing because fame and riches will certainly follow. I don't know why Mr. Rose was telling me all this. I'm just

relaying the information in case you might want to join a writing group. After all, this book isn't just about poor Billy and Jerry and Ivy and all their problems. This book is about lots of other things, including indifference, and the idea that people don't really give a fuck about anything but themselves and their shitty little worlds, although they try and act like they do care about other things besides themselves, but we all know they really don't. Movie stars and actors are good examples of these types of people, but they're not the only ones. To be honest, we're all the same. We just see movie stars and actors doing it a lot more, putting their feet in their mouths, talking about things they can't even pronounce. The real Richard Gere, not the actor Richard Gere in all the Dead Chick Flick movies, claims he wants to save the world. Of course he does, but if you slip him a butcher knife under the table from Crate & Barrel and give him a couple million bucks, he'll do a Lon Chaney (he was the original *Wolf Man*, you know, two natures) and morph into the actor Richard Gere and run off and slice-and-dice that chick in the Dead Chick Flick movie like he's making a takeout order of *moo goo gai pan* for the Dalai Lama with a gerbil stuck up his (Richard Gere's) ass. This kind of indifference and faux sentiment goes on forever, just like the Dead Chick Flick movies, and people eat it up, especially when it's prettied up and wrapped in a bow. Richard Gere looks pretty on screen, or at least he used to. Football looks pretty on screen, even if you're like me and got your egg busted up so bad by football that you can't even spell your own name. Fraternity houses look pretty to everyone except the women who've been raped by fraternity boys. College presidents look pretty all dressed up in their gowns and funny little hats--pretty to everyone except women who've been raped by fraternity boys and football players like me who were tricked by the college president cocksucker pimps into getting their eggs busted. The Google-porno machine looks pretty to everyone except the abused women who are further abused every time a fat-fuck clicks on their porn video (and gives Google another "cha-ching" in their bottomless cash generating machine) so he can wank his skinny little pecker one more time. And so on, and so on.

Okay, wait, hang on. Mr. E.P. Rose just sent me an email with an attachment containing the next chapters so I'll shut up now. He assured me that he has some good writing for you to enjoy. He also assured me that this is the kind of writing that should not be stifled, because it has been blessed by his writing group. Oh, and please don't Google the word "stifle." I don't want the Google-porno onslaught to traumatize your eyeballs. That Google stuff scares the shit out of me, and I used to be a linebacker in the NFL. Before I go, I just want to send a last callout to the ladies before I close down *Mr. Goodbar* here. It's still not too late to go burn the joint down even though Feminism (with a capital "F") took a big hit when the Google-porno machine came along and suspended it in its porno web of confusion. The capital "F" version of Feminism is in need of a serious reboot, more than just a defibrillator, and what better place to start than the Googlers who make all that coin off

the exploitation of women. Burning your bras won't help this time, ladies. It's going to take something a lot stronger, probably something that requires you to lock it and load it. Please note that I would've used "womyn" instead of the word "ladies" but hey, it's a braver and newer world we live in. I'm on your side, ladies, I really am, I swear. Come on, Seven Sisters, get your faces out of each other's crotches, and gather the troops so you can invade Google and burn the mother down. Burn baby burn. Show those cocksucking pimps that money doesn't grow out of vaginas like a chronic yeast infection forever. You gotta cut them off sometime. Last call, ladies. You gotta start somewhere. I hate to think I'm the last person standing and waving the feminist torch (that's with a lower-case "f" on purpose, in case you were wondering). I'm trying to help you here, ladies, because I know that if we're left to ourselves, men will keep fucking up the world until we burn the motherfucker to the ground. Just go Googling or go watch your favorite Richard Gere Dead Chick Flick movie, and you'll see what I mean. Or, watch a football game. It's all the same.

18. Putting on the Blitz

It was early Sunday morning and Billy lay sleeping, his mouth wide open. Jerry entered, drinking a Bud Light, hung over from Saturday night. It was the usual party night for him. He hadn't let up on Saturday night's since he was sixteen. He picked up a deflated football and threw it at Billy, smacking him on the top of the head. Billy jumped up, rubbing his eyes. He looked at the clock. It was 7:10 AM.

"What?"

Jerry laughed.

"Hot date last night?"

Billy slipped his head back under the covers. Jerry grabbed his leg.

"Heading over to Blitzkrieg?"

Billy moaned and slunk deeper into the covers.

"Forget it."

Jerry yanked the covers off him. Billy was wearing Jerry's Atlanta pajama bottoms. Jerry laughed.

"See you've been sneaking around in my stuff. You can use my rubbers if you want. Always wear a raincoat else them golddiggers will jump your bones with a paternity suit. First rule if you're gonna be a player. Especially white women. There's a whole army of them out there just dying to separate sports brothers from their green."

Blitzkrieg was an abandoned park where pick-up football games were played in downtown Durham. As they drove to Blitzkrieg, Billy put his head against the window and closed his eyes. Jerry kept punching him, trying to wake him up.

“That any way for a pro quarterback to act before the big game? Come on, Slick. Show me your game face.”

Billy moaned. Jerry decided to stop off at one of his car washes on the outskirts of Chapel Hill. He'd gotten a call about some vandalism. As he and Billy pulled up and got out, they could see that someone had torn off one of the pressure hoses. Water was spewing everywhere. Jerry could see the name of a fraternity spray painted on the bay. He suddenly went to his place. Billy saw it come over him. He moved back, letting Jerry have his space, even though the water was shooting out of the hose and spraying like a severed artery.

This time at Jerry's place, he was thinking about the run-ins he'd had with frat boys. One particular time stood out in Chapel Hill. Jerry and two other football players happened to walk in on a party and see the frat boys doing a *steppin' an' fetchin'* skit. That didn't end well for the frat brothers. Even though the other football players were white, Jerry and his teammates cleared the house pretty quickly. Jerry and his buddies loved any excuse to empty out a bar, a party, and especially a fraternity house. Jerry was processing all the frat boy shit he'd put up with in his life, adding it up on in his head. It was coming fast and hard, cascading down like the water from the broken hose. Billy walked up and touched Jerry then pushed him. Jerry finally came out of his place.

“What?”

“The water, we gotta stop it.”

Jerry surveyed the car wash.

“Fuck.”

Jerry ended up calling the fire department to shut off the water. He didn't have any regular help. The car washes ran themselves except for periodic maintenance, which was done by a contractor. Even though Jerry had automated most of the bays to accept credit cards, people still mostly paid with quarters. The quarters trickled in, keeping him floating along. Billy helped clean up the water. Jerry watched Billy as he slowly mopped up the water. He seemed bored.

“What, you too good to do some honest work?”

Billy shrugged. Jerry was just as tired of messing around the car wash as Billy. The frat prank had cost him money. He was pissed off.

“Let's go kick some ass.”

Ten minutes later they were in Durham at Blitzkrieg. The field was mostly dirt and overgrown weeds in a shallow bowl that was surrounded by small hills, almost like an amphitheater. Blitzkrieg was a well-known thing in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area. It was almost like cock fighting or backroom brawling and there was always a party atmosphere. The cops usually didn't bother any of the players or anyone watching the game. When a fight broke out, the players would usually take care of it in their own way. Spectators would sit on the hill and watch the show and drink beer, trying to shake off a Saturday night. College and pro scouts sometimes came out to see if there was any new talent. They were mostly looking for speed. Size didn't interest them. A couple of fast kids had been signed to pro teams, both as safeties. This was bare-bones, full-on, ass-busting tackle football. Somebody usually ended up in the ER after each game. There was an urban legend that someone had been killed playing Blitzkrieg. A lot of ex-players, college and pro, and wannabe youngsters all converged on the park to see if they had something to show off. Active college players would sometimes sneak out--usually the second and third-stringers from Duke or Carolina or N.C. State who wanted to get their rocks off on civilians--civvies as they called them. At Blitzkrieg, they could do a little extracurricular head-knocking from their usual meat squad work at the university, which was their sacrificial role for the first stringers. Football was hierarchical, just like the military, everything rolled downhill. The starters got all the glory. Rival motorcycle gangs sometimes showed up to play on opposing teams as a way to get out their Saturday night feuds that hadn't been resolved.

Jerry hadn't played at Blitzkrieg in over five years. He used to come out to try and pick up women. He was fairly successful at first, but his efforts faded as time went on and the ladies got younger and started to forget who he was. If Jerry did score, he and his quarry usually ended up as a Sunday afternoon screw in his recreation room with football games going on all the televisions. Waking up hurting on Monday's got a lot harder to do, the older you got. Jerry wasn't missing that part of football and Blitzkrieg just prolonged it. When he first quit the NFL, Blitzkrieg was where Jerry went to still get his rocks off on Sunday. Sunday football had been an addiction for him, something hard to give up when the fall came around. Just like the fat-fucks liked to watch it, he liked to play it, hard and mean, down and dirty. And at Blitzkrieg, he would gladly bust the head on anybody who was stupid enough to show up and go up against a former NFL linebacker who'd made his living cracking heads. Except these heads didn't have helmets. Jerry loved it. No protection at all. He knew how to deliver a head blow and protect himself. He was well-trained in the assassin's art. The Sports Machine had taught him to be efficient and deadly. This was war, after all. No need to be sloppy. It was no place for dilettantes although there were plenty to be found. And Jerry didn't mind being the one to remind them of their place on the ladder. When a player on the other team

crossed Jerry, he'd devise a form of punishment that suited their crime. For a third-string college quarterback from UNC or N.C. State or a smaller school like Elon or Shaw who was showing off and thought he was hot shit, maybe a simple bell ringing. For a simple insult like "motherfucker" from a civvie, maybe a broken finger or what was called an *eardrummer*. It wasn't a full eardrum burst, just a ring that wouldn't go away for a couple days, almost like a permanent telephone ringing in your head. For the word "nigger" from a brother, maybe a busted ankle or a hit to the knees from behind to show who's boss. For the word "nigger" from a white guy, a full blow to the head--knocked out cold as a block of concrete--an almost certain trip to the Duke University emergency room less than two miles away. He'd put one poor hillbilly who'd ventured down from Virginia in the Duke intensive care unit for three days. The man had called Jerry a "faggot NFL nigger" and then called him a "pussy" to top it off. The poor bastard seemed to think that Jerry and all his NFL comrades were just overpaid assholes who didn't have any more talent than he had. He found out fast what "talent" was. Talent was making the other guy pay when the debt was due. The incident even made the papers because there was a big fight afterwards between the two teams. It wasn't black against white, just a big mix-it-up street brawl. The cops had to be called in to break it up. Jerry watched it all and let them fight. Street brawling wasn't his game. His game was head cracking and he was the king.

Billy and Jerry got out of the car and walked toward the field. It was full of players warming up and throwing footballs. Billy hesitated. They all looked tough and mean, hungry, huge.

"What if I get hurt?"

Jerry laughed.

"These chumps? You're a pro."

"They're big."

"I'll play halfback and run interference for you. You can lay back on defense. No tackles. Nobody's going to touch you with me around. Okay?"

Billy shrugged.

"I don't know."

Jerry grabbed him and pulled his face close as if Billy were a teammate and it was goal-to-go for the other team. He hadn't done that in a long time.

"People come out here to watch. They need to see you in action. You need to throw at least six 40-yard touchdown passes. You wanna play pro ball or do you want to be one of the fat-fucks playing with themselves in the stands?"

Jerry pointed to a pick-up truck where a rag-tag group of large men had set up a beer keg for their version of a tailgate party. Billy swallowed then nodded.

“Okay.”

A football wobbled by from a sideways punt. Jerry grabbed the ball. The kicker, a 25-year-old named Drumwright, yelled at Jerry to throw the ball back. Jerry ignored him. He threw the ball to Billy.

“Let's see how that golden arm's doing. Hit me long.”

Jerry took off running. Drumwright picked up on what they were doing and started to cover Jerry. Jerry still had good speed even with his knee problems. He made a zig-zag at 40 yards out from Billy, then angled away in a downfield sprint. Drumwright tried to keep up, but Jerry had some steam built up. Billy rared back and slung the ball side-armed. The throw had a little wobble to it but it was a low arcing 55-yard toss that flew right over Drumwright's outstretched arms. Jerry snagged it and sped toward the goal line. He crouched down and caught his breath then gave the thumbs up to Billy. Drumwright trotted up to Jerry, more out of breath than Jerry.

“Not bad for an old man. Who's the arm?”

Jerry laughed and stabbed the ball into Drumwright's gut, making him grunt. Jerry headed off toward Billy as the players lined up and got ready to pick sides. In the middle of the field, they counted “1-2” for teams. Jerry rigged it so that he and Billy were both “1's” and on the same team. An ex-quarterback for Duke named Parrish wanted to play quarterback but Jerry shook his head. Jerry quickly designated himself team captain and made Billy quarterback. Parrish muttered something under his breath to Jerry and switched sides and another player came over in his place. That was strike one for Parrish, according to Jerry's scorekeeping. Jerry's team called themselves the Dopers. The other team called themselves the Jackals.

Jerry's team kicked off. On the first play, Parrish took the ball and went back to pass, but all the receivers were covered. Jerry was playing linebacker and loitered around the line. He couldn't resist the temptation. He did a sideways end around Parrish and came up behind him and nailed him. It took a few moments for Parrish to get up. He stood, wobbly, and pointed a finger at Jerry, but nothing came out of his mouth. Jerry grinned at him. Parrish staggered back to the huddle and called another play. Jerry was playing linebacker again. Parrish kept a close eye on him this time. Jerry knew he was going to throw because he didn't want to get his ass busted again. Billy hung back, playing safety. Jerry kept yelling back to him, “No tackles.”

Parrish took the snap and dropped back to pass. Jerry pulled back from the line, and let one of the receivers have some daylight. He knew Parrish would probably take the bait and throw to him.

He did. Parrish shot a bullet at the receiver. Jerry let him catch the ball then nailed him hard. He started yelling immediately. Everybody crowded around to see what was wrong. The receiver's leg was crumpled under him, twisted back on the side. It probably wasn't broken, but he was screaming in pain. Drumwright and two big guys suddenly surrounded Jerry. They were bikers. They each outweighed Jerry by fifty pounds. Drumwright held the ball as if he owned it.

"What the fuck you do that for?"

Jerry grinned.

"Our ball--"

Jerry snatched the football from Drumwright then ran over to Billy. Billy had his eyes glued on the bikers as they hauled the injured player off the field.

"You broke his leg, Unk."

"Just twisted it a little. He'll be alright."

He grinned at Billy. Billy shook his head. Jerry grabbed him and pulled him close to his face. Jerry had that look in his eyes again. It scared Billy.

"Listen to me, Slick. This is the NFL. They pay us to kick ass. If you can't take it, go sit in the stands with the other fat-fucks and little girls and play with your dolls."

Jerry suddenly realized what he was doing. He let Billy loose and looked around. The other players were staring at him. Jerry took a deep breath.

"Okay, huddle up."

The players moved a little closer, making sure to stay a few steps away from Jerry. Billy kept watching the player with the busted leg. An ambulance siren wailed in the distance as Jerry called the play.

"Okay, we're going long. Billy's going to throw to Streak."

Jerry pointed to an eager 19-year-old kid named Streak. He was small, almost dainty, but quick as a rabbit. Even his eyes were quick, darting back and forth.

"Streak here's gonna hang at the line then take off and Billy's gonna hit you about 50 yards out. Got it?"

Streak nodded his head quickly. Jerry broke the huddle and everyone got into position. Jerry played halfback, protecting Billy. Billy called the signals and the center shot the ball back to him. Streak paused a moment at the line, then took off as fast as he could. A lineman came toward Billy. Jerry blindsided him in the knee, sending him down face-first into the dirt. Another lineman came toward Billy but as he got close to Jerry, he saw the crazy look in Jerry's eyes and moved around him

and eventually wandered off back toward the line. Billy had a lot of time. He aimed and let the pass fly. It was a 60-yard string to Streak. The defender didn't have a chance. Streak was in the end zone five seconds later. He did a standing flip then punted the ball. The players grabbed Billy and smacked him around. Jerry got in the middle of it all and pushed them away.

“Okay, that’s enough, watch out for the merchandise.”

During halftime, Jerry went to his car and taped up his knee and downed three beers. Big Dick, one of the bikers, walked up and offered Jerry some coke from a silver vial with a snake head for the cap.

“Might help that knee, old man.”

Jerry didn’t hesitate to take the coke. He put a line on his hand and snorted it.

“How much?”

“On the house.”

Jerry nodded a thanks as he started to feel the coke tingle the back of his nose then slide on down into his throat. It was good shit, barely cut. Good dope, like a lot of things in life, got right to doing what it was supposed to do, no fucking around. Jerry could feel his heart start to pound. The rush was rolling through his arteries, through his veins, back into his heart and straight up into his brain. He let out a deep sigh and stood up. The top of his head felt like it had opened up. He felt like fucking Superman. He was ready to go kick some ass on the field. Big Dick grabbed one of Jerry's beers, opened it, and drank it halfway down in a gulp as he monitored Jerry’s reaction to the coke. He grinned at Jerry.

“Whatcha think?”

Jerry’s eyes were wide now. The smile on his face was beaming out 50 thousand Watts of coke-induced adrenaline.

“Fuck.”

Big Dick grinned even wider.

“No middle man. Peruvian marching powder. Twice as good as Columbian.”

He looked out at Billy on the field.

“That kid's good. Billy, right?”

“Yeah.”

“He the one with the busted head I heard about?”

Jerry shrugged.

“I hear you're in trouble. Bubba been paying you visits?”

Jerry stared at him.

"I got a service I can offer you if you like."

Jerry closed his eyes, savoring the coke for a moment.

"What kind of service?"

Big Dick laughed.

"Housecleaning service."

Jerry looked out at the field and watched Billy throwing the ball with Streak. Billy let a high-arching bomb loose. It seemed to float forever and move toward a flock of geese as the wind held it up. Jerry watched the birds. They looked so free. His mind was going back to that place. Big Dick punched him.

"Hey man, you listening to me?"

Jerry snapped out of it. He looked up at Big Dick then took the vial of coke and did another line.

"Maybe I'll get back to you."

Big Dick laughed.

"We're professional and we're cheap."

Jerry took another snort of coke and headed back onto the field.

During the second half of the game, Billy threw for eight touchdowns. They beat the other team by over fifty points. They quit keeping score after Billy's sixth touchdown pass. If they would've been keeping statistics, Billy's performance would've been a record for Blitzkrieg. Jerry sent Drumwright home with a broken nose after he got past him and tried to tackle Billy. Billy didn't get a scratch on him. As Jerry and Billy got back to the car to leave, Big Dick rolled up on his Harley with his buddies. He had a gash over his eye and another cut on his huge tattooed forearm. He put his arm inside the car. He seemed to delight in the wounds. He pulled a card out of his vest and put it in Jerry's hand along with two grams of coke.

"Still a badass, Jerr. Give me a call sometime."

Big Dick and his buddies zoomed away.

Outside Short Stuff's Barbecue, the parking lot was filled with BMW's and Mercedes. Shorty walked toward the entrance, scratching his head at all the fancy cars. Maybe there was a convention in town or maybe the advertising was working. He shook his head. Something didn't seem right. As he entered, he saw Ivy and Sue working the registers. A dozen well-dressed men with brief cases

were waiting in Ivy's line. Nobody was in Sue's line. Shorty still couldn't figure it out. He approached the line of men.

"We got a perfectly good register open right here. Sue here will be happy to take your order."

Sue frowned.

"Lawyers, come to see Ivy."

Shorty suddenly understood what was going on. He clapped his hands.

"Okay, fellas, I appreciate the business, but you're scaring off my customers. If you want barbecue, you're at the right place, but you gotta do your lawyering somewhere else."

The lawyers shuffled around. Shorty looked at Ivy.

"Just pick one, Ivy. I got a business to run here. People are gonna think somebody died in here."

She scanned the men's faces then pointed to one in particular. Shorty got a puzzled look on his face.

"Why'd you pick him?"

"Guess I like his briefcase."

Later, Ivy sat and talked with a lawyer whose name was Don Howerton. He was a lanky, friendly looking man with glasses. Don chowed down on Shorty's barbecue as he talked. Shorty cleaned a table nearby and tried to eavesdrop without looking too suspicious.

"Definitely the best barbecue in Carolina. I'm talking North Carolina. I don't know what that stuff is they make down in South Carolina much less up in Virginia."

Don wiped some barbecue sauce off his face.

"If we play this right, we can sue the high school, the coach, the assistant coaches, the school district, the helmet manufacturer, and even N.C. State."

Ivy shook her head.

"But Billy's gonna be fine. That's what the doctor said."

Don took a bite and chewed, waiting to talk before he swallowed.

"Is he ever going to play football again?"

"Not if I can help it."

He smiled and washed the barbecue down with a big swig of Coke.

"Then we can sue for damages. That's what lawsuits are all about, Mrs. Gotschall. Damages. Think of all the money Billy will never make, millions and millions of dollars. His uncle played pro

ball, so it'll be easy to convince a jury that Billy would've probably followed the same path. Talent runs in the family."

Ivy paused and looked him deep in the eyes.

"Is money all you people think about?"

Don held back a grin as he chewed the sandwich.

"I am deeply concerned about the welfare of your son and you. What happened to him is a tragedy of the first degree."

She took a moment and thought about what he'd just said.

"Tragedy? Might just be the best thing that ever happened to him. Let him lead a normal life, go to college, learn how to work hard and save money like regular folks, not think he can go through life with a pass. Get it out of his head that he's special and better than everybody else."

Don wiped his mouth slowly then took her hand and held it.

"Mrs. Gotschall, I'm not sure you understand. We're talking about millions of dollars here. No more working at fast food restaurants. You'll be able to have your own chain of restaurants if you like. You'll be set. Billy will be taken care of. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"I understand. I understand exactly."

She stood up quickly.

"Mrs. Gotschall, if we start the lawsuit now we might get the school district to open up hearings. That's our best bet right now. I know you want to make sure that other children aren't injured."

"Our?"

Don grinned.

"Well, yes. You, me, Billy. We can even attach Jerry to the lawsuit especially if he shows any signs of head injury. We can sue the NFL. We might even be able to prove that Jerry influenced Billy to go into football with his success and fame as an NFL player. We've got a damn good case."

She seemed somewhat interested now.

"What about the money?"

"What about it?"

"You still want their money, right?"

Don took a long pause then nodded.

"Yes, that's the way these things work."

“That’s what I thought.”

She walked away. Don sighed. He and Shorty locked eyes. Don called to Ivy.

“Mrs. Gotschall--”

Shorty slipped over and grabbed Don's plate.

“I think she's done talking to you. Have a nice day. Come back and see us soon.”

19. Party On

The next Saturday night, a party was in full swing at Jerry's house. After Blitzkrieg, Jerry had decided to throw a bash to prove to everyone that he was still a player. Ivy's face seemed to be everywhere with her protests--newspapers, television, even in a couple of local magazines. Jerry wanted to make sure everybody knew where he stood. Plus there was Billy. Jerry had to look out for him and make sure everybody knew that Billy was still in the game, headed for the NFL just like his uncle. Football ran on rumors almost as much as it did talent.

In the house, ball games played on every television. The place was packed with people--athletes, women, petty drug dealers, shady characters, hangers-on, almost athletes, faded athletes--the oddball menagerie of people that Jerry marginally was acquainted with. Billy was helping Jerry answer the door. The doorbell rang. Billy opened it to see Big Dick and one of his biker buddies. Big Dick grinned.

"Don't think we're on the list--"

He laughed. Billy turned to get Jerry, but he was already there. It looked as if Jerry had been waiting for Big Dick to arrive. Jerry handed Billy a beer and pulled him aside.

"Keep an eye on my junk, especially my trophies. Last party I had somebody stole my MVP trophy. Found it at a pawn shop down in Charlotte. Had to pay two grand to get it back."

He turned back to Big Dick and his buddy and pulled them inside.

"Let's go upstairs."

Later, Billy stood in a corner, keeping to himself, watching the action. Jerry walked up, his nose white from coke. Billy saw Big Dick and his buddy leave through a back door.

"What'd he want?"

"Just a little business."

Jerry winked. He seemed higher than usual.

"Come on, let's show off the new movie star to everybody."

He put his arm around Billy then pulled him along. They walked around the rooms. Jerry motioned to different people.

"This is what it's like, Slick. There's Michael Vincent over there. He played half-back for New Orleans. You remember him. There's Curtis Yancey. He played for Miami. He was one badass defensive end. Called him the Undertaker. They say he could knock a man down just by staring at

him. And there's Jay Jackson. He played basketball for Houston. We don't count basketball players in our club. They think they get all the girls."

Billy looked around, impressed. A couple of huge football players walked up and grabbed Jerry. The largest one was Nathan. He was the size of a refrigerator.

"Hey, Jerr, tell us the truth about all this stuff on the news. You ain't pissin' on football, are you?"

Jerry laughed.

"You know how those news people make up stories and put words in your mouth."

Nathan punched a thick finger into Jerry's chest.

"I think you ought to tell everybody here what you just told me. That's why you're havin' this party, ain't it?"

Nathan clapped his hands and banged two beer bottles together.

"Hey, everybody. Jerry's got something to say."

The crowd got quiet. Jerry looked around at everyone staring at him. He shuffled a moment and looked at Billy.

"Thanks for coming. I got a little something I'd like to say. I want everybody to know that Jerry Gotschall's got the biggest hard-on you ever seen for the game of football."

He pointed to Nathan.

"And Nathan here's seen some big dicks, ain't you, Nathan? Used to keep a tape measure and a notepad as I recall."

"Not for you, that's for sure."

Nathan chuckled, his whole body shaking. Jerry pointed to Billy.

"Same goes for my nephew Billy here. Billy's in perfect health. Doctor just signed his papers. He'll be playing for Atlanta before you know it, just like his uncle."

Jerry fist bumped Billy then hugged him. Everyone cheered and clapped. There was a commotion at the front door. Jerry turned quickly and ran toward the door, thinking it might be a fight breaking out. As he got there, the same platinum blonde woman from the limo entered. Her name was Clarissa Whitehall. She wore a Chanel dress. A player pointed her in Jerry's direction. As Clarissa walked across the room, the crowd parted like the Red Sea. She held a dainty hand out to Jerry.

"Hello, Jerry. Clarissa Whitehall. You busy?"

The room suddenly went silent. Jerry looked around at the grinning faces of the men who were all staring at Clarissa. Jerry wasn't sure what to say.

"I know you?"

Nathan stepped forward.

"If you don't, then I'll be happy introduce you. Hi, I'm Nathan."

He held out his huge hand to Clarissa. She placed her petite hand in his, shook it, then smiled and winked at Nathan as if she held some secret.

"Nathan, if you keep it up this season you might be playing for San Francisco before soon. Got that beautiful stadium down in Santa Clara and the weather there is fantastic compared to old Candlestick. I know how much you like warm weather. You're from Florida, right? Kissimmee. Didn't you work at Disney World your first summer at Florida State?"

Nathan's eyes flew wide open.

"Damn, think I'm in love."

He hugged her. Suddenly, there was a scuffle in a nearby room. Jerry ran out and jumped into the fray between two huge college football players. He grabbed one of the players by the arm, swung it around his back, and hauled him out the door. Nathan smiled at Clarissa. They could hear Jerry yelling at the man outside.

"Jerry had a little business to take care of. He'll be right back. Can I get you something?"

Clarissa smiled.

"Scotch."

Downstairs at Jerry's house, Billy patrolled Jerry's trophy room, making sure nobody was tearing stuff up or stealing anything. He saw Nancy and Janet, the two women that were in the house before. They were drinking beers and laughing. They kept watching him. He knew they were talking about him. He heard Nancy say "Payless" and point at his shoes, which caused Janet to double over laughing in her giggly way. Billy turned away and spotted a man holding one of Jerry's trophies upside down. Billy ran over and grabbed it from him.

"Hey, that's Jerry's MVP from the Pro Bowl."

The man shook his head.

"Just lookin'. Damn. Who the motherfuck died and made you king?"

The man walked on, muttering under his breath. Billy carefully replaced the trophy and looked around the room. Janet and Nancy were still laughing at him. Billy heard noises in the hallway. Four players from his high school team were headed into the room. They'd snuck in a back door and all

wore blue and white letter jackets. Billy froze. He wanted to disappear. He looked behind the players. Elisa and another cheerleader were tagging along after them. Billy tried to turn away, but Elisa was already looking at him. Billy stared at her a moment then headed down a back hallway which led upstairs. Nancy peeled away from Janet with a wink and followed Billy. Billy trudged upstairs and opened the door to his room. The light was off. He flipped the switch on. A football player and woman were humping on the waterbed. The player yelled at Billy.

“Hey. Shut the fucking door. Shit--”

Billy ran out and slammed the door. He headed for a spare bedroom and turned the television on and fell on the bed. There was a quiet knock and Nancy entered, smiling. She shut the door gently then took a swig of her beer and moved closer.

“Sorry about the other day. Jerry says you're a good kid.”

There was another quiet knock. Janet entered with another woman. They were both grinning.

“Remember me, Payless?”

She giggled. The third woman was white. She was pretty and looked like she might have come from money. She had a half-moon scar that ran across her cheek. In a certain light, the plastic surgeon's delicate work disappeared. But in the wrong light, the scalpel hadn't been good enough. The razor's edge of beauty fell to the side. She was damaged goods with the look of a certain type of women who serviced sports stars and celebrities, a distant stare not unlike the one that Jerry now had. Theirs was the look of lost and forgotten souls, always searching for the next party or ball or soirŽe that would remind them of their first time. Once you'd been deflowered, you could never go back. The thrill that was once there diminished in time, slowly migrating into addiction. All three women moved closer to Billy. He fell back on the bed.

“What's going on?”

Nancy smiled.

“Well, Payless, me and Janet here thought you might need some cheering up. We brought a friend just for you because we know how much you like white pussy.”

Billy looked at the women. The thought of Elisa was fresh in his mind. The beers had dulled his senses. It only took a few moments before everyone was naked. Billy was on his back on the bed with Nancy on top of him. Janet straddled his face. The third girl was spooning blow into his nose. Billy snorted it then looked up at himself in the mirror on the ceiling. Nancy let out a huge sigh. Maybe it was real. Maybe Billy had turned her on. Nancy slid over and the other woman started to straddle him. There were noises outside the door. Jerry entered, his nose coked up. He was pulling a

girl behind him. She was giggling, sounding a lot like Janet. It took a moment for Jerry's brain to adjust to what he was seeing.

"What the fuck."

Billy scrambled to get off the bed but got tangled in the sheets. He tried to cover himself with a pillow.

"Ain't nothin', Unk."

Jerry grabbed him and yanked him feet-first off the bed.

"Fuck."

Nancy jumped up and grabbed Jerry.

"Don't do nothin' crazy now, Jerr."

Jerry looked at the other women.

"Crazy? You ain't seen crazy."

The third woman tried to escape but Jerry grabbed her by the neck and threw her on the bed. Jerry started to take off his clothes. Nancy grabbed him.

"What the fuck you doing, Jerry?"

He grabbed Nancy and threw her on the bed with the other woman.

"Get your ass on that bed girl."

"I can't, it ain't right, Jerry. He's your kin."

Billy jumped up and grabbed Jerry. They started to wrestle. Jerry tossed Billy across the room. He hit the wall so hard his arm went all the way through the sheetrock and stuck out into the hallway. He fell to the floor, his arms still sticking out the other side of the wall. He lay there a long moment, groaning. Jerry ran over and pulled Billy up and smacked his face around. He grabbed a beer and poured it on him. He yelled at the girls.

"See what you did. Fuckin' whores--"

Jerry slapped Billy's face some more. His eyes finally fluttered open.

"How you gonna get back on the team if you're fuckin' around with a bunch of shit like this?"

Billy looked around.

"Just doin' it the way you do it, Unk."

"Don't never do nothing the way I do it. And don't never get between me and a piece of ass."

Jerry looked around the room. More people had entered and were watching. Jerry jumped up and yelled.

“Get the fuck out of here. All of you. Now.”

Jerry ran out of the room then down the stairway, yelling as he went. The party was in full swing.

“All you sorry motherfuckers get the fuck out of my house.”

Nobody paid any attention to him. They were either too stoned or thought it was some kind of joke. A woman smiled and blew him a crack pipe hit. He pushed her away, almost knocking her down the stairs.

“You hear me. Now. All you motherfuckers. Out!”

The party continued. Jerry picked up a chair and tossed it through a window. Everybody quieted down

“Don't never come back here.”

The people slowly started to clear out. After a few minutes, only one person remained, Clarissa Whitehall. She moved toward Jerry, stopped and smiled.

“We'll talk when you settle down.”

She walked out.

Late that night, Jerry sat on a bar stool in a bar in downtown Durham, drinking and watching a game on television. The coverage cut to a reporter who was standing in front of Ivy and Doris as they held up their football protest signs. A group of lawyers were drinking nearby. One of them wandered over to Jerry. He was fat and sloppy drunk from a night on the town. He patted Jerry on the back.

“Jammer Jerr--”

Jerry pushed away and tried to ignore him.

“Ain't football been good to you, Jammer Jerr?”

Jerry snarled a “Get lost” then pushed him away. The fat lawyer put his hands up and looked over at his friends. They called him back over. He shuffled back toward them slowly, wobbling as he went, pointing back to Jerry.

“That's Jammer Jerr. He was my favorite linebacker. I played linebacker in high school until my mommy made me quit. She said I'd get hurt--”

The other lawyers laughed. Jerry watched them out of the corner of his eye while he watched Ivy on television. They reminded him of fans and their Jekyll and Hyde ways. He thought about how quickly you could go from hero to hated. When he was in high school, he had a reverence for the fans. By the time he got to college, he realized it was just a show--a game--a lion's den--and he was

on the bad end of the deal. He was expected to perform, to give them their money's worth. The fans were always drunk, partying, having a good time. Jerry was in the cotton patch dealing out and taking punishment. The fans didn't give a shit what happened to the players. The players knew it. And in time, the players would all come to feel the same about the fans, the fat-fucks.

Jerry had first heard the word at his first game he played against Florida State. One of the Florida State offensive linemen had said it after their quarterback was injured. The team physician and trainers took extra time to get the quarterback off the field. His name was Aikin. He was a good-looking kid from Pensacola. Jerry had hit him hard and broke two of his ribs. The fans booed Jerry and threw ice at him. One piece hit him in the face and cut his cheek. Aikin didn't play the rest of the season. The Florida State lineman wasn't mad at Jerry. He and Jerry joked about his missed block on Jerry as they waited for Aikin to be carried off the field. The Florida State lineman was a big white kid from Minnesota named Thorsen. He was a mountain and Jerry had finally figured out his weakness. He didn't have any peripheral vision in his left eye. Somebody had probably poked it half out in high school. As they waited for the stretcher to take Aikin away, Thorsen kept looking up in the stands and yelling "Fat-fucks!" as loud as he could in his thick, lumberjack Minnesota accent. Even though the fans were booing Jerry, Thorsen was taking his side.

The next time Jerry heard "fat-fucks" was at a game against Texas A&M. It was a bowl game--one of those bullshit bowls they put up to sell Bud Light and Buicks and all the other crap that sports shills for. It was Christmas. All the players for UNC and Texas A&M were bored, disinterested. They missed tackles. They ran plays half-speed. Even the referees weren't calling penalties when they should have. Everybody wanted to be home with their family or their girlfriends. But here they were in fucking Phoenix playing in some bowl named for lousy Mexican food. As the game progressed, the fans started to boo on every play. The players would laugh and yell "Fat-fucks!" right back at them into the stands. They never heard it. They were all too drunk. Drunk fat-fucks eating nachos and burritos and other toxic stadium food. The stadium smelled like Bourbon Street in August. When Jerry got to the pros and got a full dose of the fat-fucks, he had dreams of taking one of them and putting full gear on him and making him do a full practice in one-hundred degree heat. Just one practice then the fat-fuck would shut his pie hole forever, if he lived to tell about it.

Jerry looked back over at the fat-fuck lawyer. He and his buddies were laughing, joking, pointing at him. Jerry nursed his drink and thought about Billy. Did he really want Billy to perform for this fat-fuck and his friends? Did he really want Billy to get injured for this fat-fuck? Maybe Billy would be invincible and bullet-proof like he once was. Maybe Billy would be a god. Some players seemed to never get injured. They could slip past it all and go on to some other level. Even with the injuries,

being a player was better than being a fat-fuck. At least that's what Jerry used to think. He wasn't too sure now. He drained his drink and felt a tug at his arm. The fat-fuck was back, this time with a buddy who was almost as large. The first lawyer touched Jerry again.

"Know what I think? I think you're trying to squeeze money out of the NFL because you're fucking broke."

The second lawyer chimed in.

"Goddam lousy Jammer Jerry car washes of yours fucked up my BMW. The NFL's a money cow, ain't she, Jerry? A fucking money cow if ever there was one. You're gonna try and suck those big NFL titties, ain't ya?"

Jerry grabbed the second lawyer by his tie.

"After I kick your fuckin' ass."

"What, you gonna show me right now? Come on, Jammer Jerr. Show me what you got. I'll sue your black ass from here to Atlanta and back."

The man's friends came over and tried to pull him away, but he shook loose and got right up in Jerry's face.

"Come on, Jammer Jerr. Jam me. Come on, fucker."

Jerry tried to ignore him again but the man grabbed Jerry's shoulder. Jerry stood up and swung, smacking the man in the head.

WHACKUP!

The man dropped like a sack of turnips, laid out on the concrete floor of the bar, face up, motionless. Three of his teeth lay scattered on the floor. His lawyer friends backed away quickly then got on their cell phones. The downed lawyer started to snore and make a whistling sound through his newly missing and broken teeth. Jerry walked away almost with a proud look on his face, as if he'd just knocked out a quarterback in the Super Bowl.

20. Going South

Jerry drove south with an idea that had gotten into his head. It's the idea that old men sometimes get in their heads. It was a list--a sort of bucket list of football. He'd visit some of the places he'd played ball in college--at least the places in the Carolinas and Georgia where he'd played. He'd skip Florida and Virginia. He still owed a bookie over \$30,000 in Daytona Beach and Jerry didn't want to go anywhere near him. The bookie used to work for an old mobster. The mobster was long dead and the bookie probably was too, but Jerry didn't want to go anywhere close to Florida. It had always been a fucked-up place to him. It ran too wide-open for him, too Wild West. You could disappear in Florida and the gators would take care of the evidence. It was cold up in Virginia. He never cared much for it. The Carolinas and Georgia were where his heart was, places he could get out of town and disappear until the heat let up. His plan was to do a sideways Sherman's march, starting in Raleigh and heading south then southwest toward Georgia. As usual on these jaunts, his final destination was unknown. He had some ideas, but he wasn't sure. It just seemed like what he needed to do until things cooled down

Jerry drove down I-40 past Raleigh, then headed down the back roads, past the small hamlets and towns of North Carolina. These were just smudges on the map, fields where cows grazed and farmers mowed hay. The occasional golf course appeared. Snowbirds from places like New Jersey and Michigan had drunk the real estate brochure Kool-Aid and relocated to the South to play golf in the wintertime and live the good life. The hay fields had been turned into manicured lawns for the retirees, who usually ended up living in cheap condos instead of the big white mansions promised in the brochures. After a couple hours of driving, Jerry's car flew past a sign that said "Welcome to South Carolina -- The Palmetto State." The sign sent him back. He remembered the trips from Chapel Hill to Clemson University on the bus. The sign meant that he and the team were entering the enemy territory of the Clemson Tigers. They were cocky as roosters and strutted around the field like they invented football. And when they partied, they chased pussy like sailors on 24-hour leave.

Jerry took another swig of booze and snorted another line of coke. He ran off the road, but jerked the wheel back. He tried to follow a map to Clemson, South Carolina, but got lost somewhere south of Charlotte. He didn't really care. He bought a case of beer at a convenience store in Rock Hill, South Carolina. The clerk seemed to recognize him and even asked if he was somebody he knew, but Jerry just shook his head and threw the man a couple of twenties. Jerry got that a lot. People thought they knew him somehow, especially older men. He drove to the edge of town and down a road that led to a wildlife park of some sort. It was mostly swamp land. He sat in the gravel

parking lot drinking, watching the birds in the trees. It didn't take long before two six-packs from the case of beer were gone and he was breaking into the third. He started the car and headed south again, meandering down back roads, weaving his way like a cottonmouth in a creek.

When he got to Clemson, he drove straight to the Clemson Tigers Memorial Stadium as if it were a magnet pulling him home. He sat in the car, finishing off the third six-pack. He remembered the games--at least a dozen at Clemson. The stadium was called "Death Valley" and the "Taters," as the Tigers were known, were some mean sons of bitches on their home turf. They were mostly country kids from the Carolina low country down around Charleston and the upstate hills of South Carolina. The black guys cut Jerry some slack but the cracker kids were nasty and dirty to him. They always called the black kids on the Carolina team "Coon Dick." It was not so much derogatory as it was just the normal parlance for this part of the South. They even called their own teammates "Coon Dick" sometimes, especially if they missed a play. Jerry never got used to it. At least Carolina was a little more refined, not so much as Virginia and Maryland and the more northern ACC schools. The Taters didn't make it to many bowls, but they always kicked some serious ass in Death Valley to make up for it. And Jerry made sure he paid them back whenever he got the chance.

He stood in the parking lot and looked out at the dark stadium. The only sound was the wind swaying a grove of pine trees. He thought about the hits he'd made in the stadium. He remembered a particular hit on a quarterback. The kid's name was Ocheltree. He was tall and skinny as a fence post, but he could throw the ball a hundred yards. He actually held the record in the ACC for throwing a pass that traveled 80 yards by the hash marks, but it was a cross-field throw so it actually traveled a true distance of almost a hundred yards. The kid was an anomaly. And he was ambidextrous. He could throw 70 yards left handed. He was a freak. He would've easily been a top pick in the NFL draft just for the freak show that would attract fans.

During a timeout, the Carolina coach pulled Jerry over and told him to take Ocheltree out. The coach had a weird look in his eye. Jerry was in the heat of battle and took the coach's orders literally. Carolina needed the win to go to a bowl game. It was the middle part of the fourth quarter and the Tarheels were losing by a touchdown. In the huddle, Jerry turned to the team captain, the other linebacker whose name was Kuykendall. He was a badass white kid from the hills of North Carolina, some small town in the Smoky Mountains. He was part Cherokee and that's exactly what everyone called him--the Cherokee. He'd scream like an Indian in an old western movie when he made a good hit. Jerry told him he was going to lay Ocheltree out cold if he did the end-around pass play again. Kuykendall thought a moment then smiled at Jerry. Kuykendall did his Cherokee yell then a little wardance. The trap was set. They were out to nail Ocheltree.

It was third down and Ocheltree took the hike in shotgun formation. He faked a handoff and went back to find a receiver. He had all the time in the world, but he hadn't figured on Jerry and the Cherokee's plan to put his dick in the dirt. Jerry and the Cherokee held back, loitering just on the defensive side of the line. When the time was right, Jerry yelled at the Cherokee and they took off toward Ocheltree. The poor bastard didn't have a chance. Ocheltree hadn't figured that Jerry and the Cherokee were so fast. The gangly quarterback tried to throw the ball to a halfback who was just over the line, but Jerry and the Cherokee converged on him, sandwiching him perfectly between a quarter-ton of superbly conditioned flesh running at full speed. It would take a physics professor to figure out how much energy was transferred into Ocheltree's body. He didn't make a sound when Jerry and the Cherokee hit him. Instead, he seemed to vanish into thin air, almost as if he never existed. Jerry looked down triumphantly at Ocheltree as he lay on the dark green turf of Death Valley. His right arm was wrapped around backwards behind his back. It came all the way around to the other side of his body and hung just below his left arm. The arm was broken in four places and pulled out of socket at the shoulder. For all the mayhem Jerry inflicted on that day, Carolina still lost the game. And Ocheltree never played a single minute of football again. Jerry heard a few years later that he ended up in prison for selling dope to high school kids in Greenville, South Carolina.

Jerry got back in the car and drove. He didn't care where he was going. He just needed to keep moving. He drove down back roads, dirt roads, gravel roads, fire trails, utility right-of-ways, railroad track sidings, dead ends. It didn't matter. He drove past old plantation houses with broken windows, places where his ancestors could have toiled. Dogs barked at him, porch lights came on. An occasional pickup truck moved past him, displaying a Confederate flag conspicuously. Jerry remembered seeing Confederate flags when he was riding the bus from Milwaukee to Green Bay for an exhibition game. Somebody told him it was just the way the good ole boys in Wisconsin had of being rebels. He didn't believe that for a second. Northerners weren't any different than Southerners. They just hid it better. He'd quit thinking about all that business a long time ago when the money came pouring in like rain. Money was what mattered. Fuck everything else. Fuck those racist bastards and all the ways they hid it and all the ways they showed it and flaunted it in his face. He didn't care where he was going now just as long as he kept moving.

Jerry meandered his way toward Atlanta and on to Georgia Tech, home of the Yellow Jackets, the Ramblin' Wrecks. He made sure to stay away from the NFL Atlanta. This was purely a college road trip, a time to try and remember good things, or at least better things. He drove up and parked at Georgia Tech's Bobby Dodd stadium, which sat in downtown Atlanta. Atlanta was the place where he'd graduated from college hijinks to corporate mayhem. Corporate mayhem for average Joes and Janes as well as fat cats and all the other fat-fucks who ate the shit up on Sundays and

Monday nights and Thursday nights. Atlanta, Georgia. Home of all those sweet Southern belles. The town where women were put up on pedestals like goddesses. Women in Atlanta had perfected the art of being raised up by their men, or at least tricking their men into raising them up. It didn't matter where you came from or how much money you had or the color of your skin. A woman in Atlanta knew how to play a man. But with all their tricks, the women were still mortal. The cracks still showed in their smooth skin. Jerry had seen their cracks and he never did understand them, especially what they got out of football. The men were easy to understand. Chickenshits who thought they could've been a star if only they'd tried out for the team in high school. Armchair quarterbacks with 30 percent body fat. Jello people stuffed with lard. Jerry's body fat was five percent the day he stepped into training camp in the pros. Five percent was low, even for the most fit professional football players. Five percent was fucking amazing. And Jerry ate six full meals a day. He ate anything he wanted. Ice cream, cake, cookies, drank beer, it didn't matter. He could've lived on butter and stayed in perfect condition. Football was just in his DNA. It was not in the fat-fucks' DNA. Jerry was Superman. They were just fat-fucks on the couch, swilling down Old Milwaukee and stuffing nachos into their faces.

But the women, why did they give a fuck about football? Jerry always drew a blank on them. Sure, they got dressed up to impress each other at the games. They bought outfits that would bankrupt third-world countries. And if they were lucky and got themselves dolled-up just right, maybe a stray camera would catch them in a honey shot and they'd have their fifteen seconds and bragging rights to the ladies in the office, or wherever. In the stands, they were all so sweet one minute, then yelling at you to take off somebody's head the next minute. And there he was, out in the cotton patch busting heads for them. And there they were, up in the stands worrying if they chose the right shoes to wear.

He opened the last beer and looked around for a convenience store. He saw one in the distance near a church. He looked at the steeple with its cross aimed at heaven. He thought about Christians and football. They were worse than the women to him, especially the ones who attached some kind of spiritual meaning to the game. There seemed to be a lot of them the farther you went south and the closer you got to Texas. Georgia had its share, but Texas was full of them. Busting heads for Jesus. If their logic was correct--that God was on their side--then the players were out on the field dealing out concussions and broken bones for Jesus. Maybe that was part of the deal, their way of getting off. Religions dealt in pain and guilt. Jerry was happy to inflict the pain. He left the guilt for them. He was happy to be their executioner, their Roman soldier. He was proud to do it for the ladies and the Christians and the atheists and any other fans and fat-fucks in the stadium. That's what he was trained to do. And he was good at it.

He thought about all the bad things he'd gotten into. A lot of them weren't completely his doing. It was just part of the deal, what was expected of him, what he had to do to move on to the next level. He'd been involved in something at Georgia Tech that was a lot worse than what he'd done to the Clemson quarterback. It was after a game and a freak sleet storm had kept the team from heading back to Chapel Hill. Jerry knew a couple of the guys on the Georgia Tech team and he snuck out of the hotel and went to a party at a fraternity. The frat and the football team gang-banged two girls that night. Half the Georgia Tech defense was involved. Jerry was the lone Carolina player. The girls seemed to go along with it until the lawsuit came. The lawyers claimed the girls had been drugged and raped against their will.

It all turned out to be set-up. The girls were out to make some coin. The whole fiasco was kept under the table by the Georgia Tech lawyers. The girls were paid off a million dollars apiece. It turned out that both girls worked at a strip joint on the north side of Atlanta. A few years after the incident, Jerry saw one of them at another strip club during his first year playing for Atlanta. She was doing the old bump and grind to a Journey song. Jerry walked up and stuck a hundred-dollar bill in her G-string. She recognized him. She bent down and whispered a "Remember me?" into his ear and grinned.

He smiled at her then pulled her close, but a huge bouncer moved toward him. She motioned toward the bouncer and Jerry backed off from her. She was probably doing the bouncer a favor. Jerry was in such good shape he could've taken the bouncer out with one shot. Jerry kept watching her. He felt sorry for her. She was still performing for men. She probably blew the money on dope. Jerry had gotten lucky with the whole thing. Since he played on the opposing team, the lawyers at Carolina had swooped in and cut their own deal with the girls. Jerry later learned that lawyers from Duke, N.C. State and the University of North Carolina had gotten together and made the deal. The reason was simple. Appearances had to be kept up. If one team in the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area got a blemish, they all got a blemish. Blemishes meant less support from fans and alumni. Blemishes had to be air-brushed and whited-out, no matter what the cost. It was one of those things, the way things were done when the Sports Machine got its hackles raised. Jerry's agent was right about one thing. The Sports Machine had been very good to him. It had saved his ass more than once.

Jerry sat in the empty Bobby Dodd Stadium parking lot and drank the last of the beer. His mind suddenly started going to that place again. This time it wasn't to all the football hits he'd taken or given, it was all the women and the parties. That part of his brain was lighting up now with vivid, crazy images. They came fast. The hazy, nameless faces of the women, the broads, the debutantes, the southern belles, the skanks, the whores, the sorority girls, the strippers, the dancers, the crack

heads, the girl-next-door types, the two o'clock after closing pick-ups, the momma's little jewels, the princesses--black, white, every hue under the rainbow--all intended to serve the sports elite, to somehow push the players on to the next victory. Women who wouldn't give a black man the time of day, but if he put on a football uniform, the black skin disappeared and he was white as a snowflake. He still couldn't join a country club in the South or in many other parts of the country, but the members gladly pimped out their daughters like comfort girls if you had the right sports credentials. To the victor went the spoils, which included free and easy all-expenses-paid sport fucking with no strings attached. Who was using who? Maybe Ivy was right. Maybe something was wrong with the whole thing. Maybe football fucked up your head in more ways than one. Maybe it fucked up everybody's head. He looked up in the sky. He could see birds heading south. All types of birds. It was a cold day at the end of October. Winter would be here soon. Even in the South.

21. Third Quarter

Back in downtown Durham, Ivy and her friend Doris stood outside the Durham Public Schools administration building. They were each holding and waving their signs which read the same thing: FOOTBALL IS HURTING OUR CHILDREN. Doris had come up with the idea of trying to influence local school officials. The bureaucrats and secretaries hurried past with their heads down as they headed into the building. They didn't pay any attention to Ivy and Doris. Ivy was missing work again. She needed the money. Shorty had threatened to fire her, but he gave her a break because of Billy. A car full of teenage kids drove past and a flurry of eggs showered the women. The car sped off. The shells stung. Ivy had egg splattered in her hair and dripping down into her eyes. Doris had egg all over her blouse and pants.

Ivy wiped off the shell and yolk without a word. She was madder at herself than at the kids. They didn't know what they were doing. She looked over at Doris who was still waving her sign. Ivy's mind started reeling. Why was she doing this? Nobody else seemed to care except Doris. Billy was estranged from her. He wouldn't even talk to her now. When she called him, he wouldn't answer his phone. Maybe it was wrong what she was doing. What did she know about head injuries, brain trauma? She wasn't a doctor. Billy's neurosurgeon was at a Duke football game. It was obvious that he was a big football fan. Football head injuries must not be important enough to him to stop attending games. And his friends? They looked like doctors, too. Ivy remembered seeing one of them in the Duke neurological ward. They didn't seem to care. Who was she? A poor black woman who worked at a barbecue shack in Durham, North Carolina. She took people's orders in a drive-thru. Was she just overreacting because her son had gotten hurt? He could've been hurt the same way, slipping on a step, walking down the street. Maybe something was wrong with her. Maybe she was the one who needed help. And Doris, was she just a crazy woman looking for a cause? Just a guilty white woman who was trying to undo the injustices of the past, who had latched onto a poor black woman carrying a sign around Durham, North Carolina. This wasn't the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro. Ivy looked at Doris. She was still waving her sign as she tried to clean the egg off her clothes. She looked over and saw Ivy watching her.

"I know what you're thinking, Ivy."

The women looked at each other a long moment then laughed. They laughed until they got hysterical, then they both started to cry they were laughing so hard.

"Guess we could bake a cake," Doris said.

Ivy smiled. Doris picked up Ivy's sign and put it back in her hand.

“Don't quit, Ivy. Something good will come out of it.”

Ivy thought a moment and smiled back. She knew she had to do what she had to do.

That night, Ivy lay in bed thinking about everything that was going on in her life. The house was empty and quiet except for the occasional car driving down the street. She thought about Billy and what he was doing. Every time the phone rang she jumped up and ran to it, hoping it was him. She figured Jerry had enough sense to feed Billy and make sure he wasn't staying out late or getting into trouble. At least if he was in training, she knew he'd take care of himself. For some reason, she couldn't get Dr. Pender at Duke out of her mind. His name kept rolling around in her head. She thought about seeing him again, but the more she thought it through, she realized there wasn't much to say to him. She'd already insulted him in front of his friends. There was something else she needed to do at Duke. She barely slept at all as she thought about what she was going to do the next day.

She got up early the next morning and put on her Short Stuff's uniform as usual. She walked to the bus stop, but instead of taking the DATA bus to work, she took it in the opposite direct, to Duke University Medical Center. She wasn't going to talk to Dr. Pender this time. She had something else on her mind, something that the slogan from Short Stuff's made her realize. When she got to Duke, she didn't bother going through the main entrance, but headed straight into the Emergency Room entrance. She knew that nobody would pay much attention to a poor black woman wandering around, looking confused and lost.

Once inside the hospital, she looked for signs that pointed to the medical school. She followed them down labyrinths of hallways until she finally made her way out of the hospital and to the Duke Medical School. Busy medical students in white lab coats hurried to classes. They all seemed to move so quick, like there wasn't enough time. Ivy felt out of place in the sea of white. She followed a group of them down a long corridor to a doorway at the end. As the last student entered, the large door slammed shut and a bell rang. Ivy stared at the door a long moment. She looked at a bulletin board nearby with its usual signs and flyers. There was a football schedule for Duke. Ivy studied it a few moments then touched the schedule where Duke was scheduled to play N.C. State. She considered a moment, thinking about Billy and how if things had gone as planned, he'd be playing for N.C. State. Then she took a deep breath and walked over and opened the large door to the classroom. Ivy slowly entered the large amphitheater which was filled with students, all wearing the same white lab coats. The instructor was beginning a neuroscience lecture when she noticed Ivy.

“Ma'am, are you looking for the hospital?”

Ivy looked around at the sea of white coats staring at her. It was almost blinding. She shook her head.

“May I help you then?”

Ivy shook her head again. There was an uneasiness among the students. Ivy walked over to the huge blackboard and picked up a large piece of white chalk. She wrote slowly and methodically on the blackboard in big letters:

F-O-O-T-B-A-L-L

I-S

H-U-R-T-I-N-G

She stopped then looked back at the medical students as they watched her, perplexed. She turned back to the blackboard and wrote one final word:

U-S

She underlined “U-S” then handed the chalk to the instructor. Ivy looked up at the students. The slogan on her uniform was in full ironic view now: BEST BARBECUE IN CAROLINA AND THE US.

Ivy smiled.

“Thank you.”

The instructor smiled back uneasily. Ivy started for the exit, but there was a sound, hands clapping. She turned to see the two lone black students in the sea of white. They were standing, clapping slowly but getting louder with each clap. A few other students stood and joined them. Large tears began to stream down Ivy’s face.

The nadir of Jerry’s sojourn south found him asleep in his car, which was parked on the gravel driveway that led to an ante-bellum mansion on the outskirts of Augusta, Georgia. It was just after seven in the morning and the drone of a lawnmower woke Jerry. He opened the car door and stumbled out. Beer cans hit the ground, making a racket. Dogs began to bark in the distance. A pit bull ran toward him. Jerry got behind the door as the dog ran up.

In the distance, an old football buddy mowed the lawn. His name was Donnie Ray Porterfield. He was a former NFL quarterback for Atlanta. Jerry waved at Donnie Ray. Donnie Ray paused a moment and squinted into the morning sun, then recognized Jerry and waved him up toward the house.

In the garden area, Jerry and Donnie Ray drank coffee and ate breakfast as they looked at old photos of themselves as players. Donnie Ray’s pretty wife, Kelli, walked past on her way to do some

shopping. She was pretty in the way athlete's wives are pretty, similar to military wives, with a look of determination on her face that had kept the marriage together.

"You two better not be talking about all the girls you never got."

Donnie Ray grabbed her and sat her on his knee. He gave her a big kiss.

"Only one girl for me. You can ask Jerry here."

Jerry smiled and nodded.

"That's right. I was a bad influence but he always had your picture in his back pocket. I swear."

"You're always were a good liar, Jerry."

She smiled then grabbed Donnie Ray and pulled him around toward the front of the house, so that Jerry couldn't hear her. He knew they were talking about him. After a few moments, Donnie Ray came back over and took his seat.

"Sorry, she's been keeping a close eye on me ever since I started taking these trips to New York. I've been talking to one of the networks."

Donnie Ray picked up one of the photos.

"I sure was better looking than you."

The dogs started barking loud, making a racket. He motioned to Jerry.

"Come on. Need to feed the boys."

Donnie Ray led Jerry to a kennel full of pit bulls. They barked savagely at Jerry when they saw him. He kept his distance. Donnie Ray tried to calm the animals.

"Good boy, good boy, just happy to see you, Jerr. They wouldn't hurt a fellow football player."

He pointed out the dogs by name as he fed them slabs of steak.

"I call that one Buffalo, that one Kansas City, that one Green Bay. Over there's San Francisco. He's pretty nice, sort of laid back. And over there is Pittsburgh. He is one mean sonofabitch. Scares the shit out of me."

Donnie Ray handed Jerry a steak.

"Here, you feed them. Maybe they'll calm down and start to like you."

Jerry took the steak and threw it at San Francisco. The animal ripped into the meat, but Pittsburgh jumped on San Francisco and ripped the steak out of his mouth. The other dogs jumped into the fray. It looked like an NFL bench-clearing brawl. Donnie Ray grabbed a water hose and sprayed the dogs down. The men solemnly watched the dogs as they continued to fight and growl at each other for the scraps of meat. Pittsburgh stared at Jerry, snarling and drooling.

“Remind you of anybody?”

Jerry shrugged.

Donnie Ray slapped him on the back.

“Reminds me of you. Jammer Jerr.”

Later, Jerry and Donnie Ray tossed a football and ran some plays. Donnie Ray still had his arm. He threw Jerry a rope from 40 yards that stung Jerry’s hands. He dropped the ball.

“Getting soft on me, Jerr. I always thought you should've been a wide receiver.”

Jerry smiled.

“I'm a giver, not a taker.”

“How you doing? You set up?”

Jerry thought about it.

“Got my pension, but I made some bad investments.”

“Car washes? I heard. I can give you a loan if you like, but that's as far as I go. Go long.”

Jerry stared into the distance a moment then went for a long pass. Donnie Ray threw a 50-yard perfect spiral. Jerry made a beautiful catch and jogged up to Donnie Ray, catching his breath.

“This thing I've been hearing about your nephew. That why you're here?”

Jerry shrugged.

“Something like this had to come along sooner or later. Sorry it had to be you. I bet he’s got some real talent just like his uncle.”

Jerry took a deep breath.

“I’ve been thinking about it all. This thing's not just about Billy. It's about all of us. Know what I mean? I get these headaches--I forget things. I don't know--seems like I do some crazy things and I don't know why. I wake up crying at night. No reason.”

Donnie Ray smiled.

“Sounds like the same ole Jammer Jerr to me.”

Jerry shook his head.

“This is different.”

Donnie Ray took a deep breath and grabbed the ball.

“Football's a rough game, Jerr. Nothing's gonna change that. You can redo the helmets and the equipment all you want, but everybody knows it's like putting a band-aid on a fucking bullet wound. I told you they've been talking to me about an announcer job. I'm not biting that hand. Plus I got my

endorsements. You seen my lawnmower commercial on TV? It's going national. They gave me two of those babies.”

He pointed to another lawnmower near the garage. It was still in its packing crate.

Jerry shrugged.

“You seen Reggie? Ain't heard from him in a while.”

“Last I heard he was in real estate. Living in Myrtle Beach or somewhere up that way.”

Jerry forced a smile. There was a sadness in his eyes like something was lost that could never be gotten back.

“Good to see you, Donnie Ray. You did good.”

He headed slowly for his car. Donnie Ray called to him.

“Hey, Jerr. The Company plays rough. They don't lose. Don't forget that.”

In a seedy apartment building outside of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, Jerry knocked on the door. He'd gotten the address of his former teammate from a convenience store phone book. A scantily clad woman answered. A child cried in the background.

“Yeah?”

“Looking for Reggie Gammon.”

She gave him a long look, trying to place him. She knew he was a football player.

“Ain't you heard?”

Jerry shook his head. A snotty-nosed, four-year old boy appeared, looking up at Jerry with big eyes.

“Reggie's in the hospital. Got stabbed by some crack head in Charleston a couple days ago. This is his kid. You got any money? I need some money.”

Jerry stared at her.

“You hear me. I need some fucking money. I know you played ball with him.”

Jerry shook his head then started to walk away. She followed him. The child followed her, screaming. She grabbed at Jerry and yelled at him.

“You football players is all the same. Sorry motherfuckers. Only thing you care about is yourself. I got this kid to raise.”

The child cried louder. The woman grabbed Jerry by the back of the shirt and held on. She wouldn't let go. The child grabbed her leg and cried louder. She screamed at the child. Jerry tried to break loose but she tripped him. The three of them fell in the grass. Neighbors looked out windows.

Jerry tried to pull himself toward the car. The woman kept holding on to him and screaming. The child cried louder.

“Sorry motherfuckers. All of you--”

A large shirtless man ran out of one of the apartments with a baseball bat. He held it over Jerry's head, threatening him.

“Get the fuck outta here.”

Jerry held his hands up to his face to protect himself. He shook loose from the woman then took off.

At Jerry's house, Elisa walked up and knocked on the door. Billy answered. He was wearing a clean football jersey. She smiled.

“Hey.”

“What's up?”

“You living here now, I guess?”

Billy nodded. She looked quickly inside the house.

“Nice place.”

She took a deep breath. Billy looked out in the street and could see her father standing by the car. He seemed angry, impatiently waiting for her.

“I wanted to tell you in person. I didn't want you to hear it from somebody else. I'm going out with Martin now.”

“Martin?”

She put her head down then looked back up with tears in her eyes.

“I'm sorry, Billy.”

Billy tried to act tough and not let it get to him.

“Big deal.”

Elisa smiled sadly.

“Just wanted to tell you in person.”

She hugged him then walked away. Elisa's father swung open the passenger door for Elisa as she made her way to the car. He kept looking at Billy as if he'd done something wrong. Billy didn't blink. He understood what was going on. Elisa and her father had gotten into an argument. Now that Billy wasn't a football star anymore, he was just another poor black kid from the bad part of town. He wanted to yell at Elisa and her father and tell them both to go to hell, but he knew it

wouldn't do any good. They drove away. Tears flooded Billy's eyes. He wiped them away and sat on the porch. He wanted to get up and run, but he just sat there staring ahead. Curtain windows in neighboring houses moved back and forth. He wanted to tell the neighbors to go to hell as well. A van moved slowly up the street and stopped. Big Dick got out with another biker.

"Hey, Billy?"

A third man got out of the van. He was huge, even bigger than the other two. The men made a circle and widened it as they moved toward Billy. Big Dick was on point. Billy stood up as Big Dick got close and put his foot on the first step of the porch.

"What do you want?"

Big Dick smiled.

"Jerry around? Can't find him nowhere. Need to talk to him about some private business."

Billy shook his head.

"Been gone a couple days. I don't know where he is."

"That a fact? You were pretty good the other day out there. Gonna be a big star someday, huh? Just like your uncle. Gonna make a lot of that NFL money, ain't you?"

He laughed. Billy stared at him.

"Except your momma don't want you to play football no more. Says you got your head hurt."

He pointed to the huge man. He had a scar that ran across his face to a cauliflower ear.

"Jake's been hit in the head a few times, ain't you, Jake?"

Jake nodded and grinned through a mouthful of silver and gold teeth.

"Last time I think it was a tire iron."

Jake laughed to the other men, then reached out and touched Billy's head. Billy pushed him away. Big Dick grabbed Billy's arm and they started to wrestle. Billy got in one good punch to Big Dick's face, but Big Dick was too strong. The other men jumped on Billy and dragged him kicking toward the van. Jake duck taped Billy's mouth and they threw him in the back. The van took off down the street. Curtains moved in neighboring windows and then there was silence except for the sound of small birds chirping.

Jerry drove west from Myrtle Beach into the wilds of South Carolina, the sandhill country, small scrub brush and pine trees. He wasn't sure where he was going now. He didn't want to head back home, even though he could feel something tugging at him. After about an hour of driving, he pulled up and stopped at a small house in Florence, South Carolina. He opened a beer and took a long pull. Three young boys played football on the lawn. One boy wore a football helmet that was

too big for him. The other kids tackled him, piling on. Jerry watched them, smiling, and then for a split second, Jerry was in the moment, spearing a quarterback. He quickly snapped out of it when he heard one of the boys crying. Jerry jumped out of the car, worried about the child. A woman appeared. She was one of Jerry's girlfriends from long ago--too long ago. The story had been repeated many times except now there was a child and he didn't know if it was his. The mother had written him letters, threatening a paternity test and even a lawsuit, but she never went through with it. She was a poor woman and her life was hard. She had a drug problem and didn't understand the law and how to navigate the system. She gave Jerry a long look then walked over and comforted the child.

She took off the boy's helmet. He looked over at Jerry. Jerry watched him, studying his face. He wanted to go over and just look at the child, just be close to him, just for a minute or two. A car pulled up beside Jerry. He looked over. It was Bubba. He was eating his usual barbecue sandwich. Bubba rolled down the window, licking his plump greasy fingers.

"Ya know, Jerr, this South Carolina barbecue ain't no count, tastes like raccoon. More you chew it, the bigger it gets in your mouth. Tell you what. How about me and you open up a Short Stuff's down here in South Carolina. We could start a franchise with all that big money you got comin' in. Me and you, Jerr. How about it? Sure as hell got to be better than car washes."

Jerry stared at him.

"What money?"

"They gonna make you a deal."

"Who?"

"Don't tell me you ain't heard yet. They're gonna make you a deal if you get her to shut up. That's the good news. The bad news is the boss man's worried, Jerr. You ain't gonna run off with all his money, are you? I hear you got another kid down in Georgia, maybe one in Florida? You football players are almost as bad as basketball players."

Bubba laughed and looked out at the children. He pointed to the boy who'd been crying.

"That one looks just like you, Jerr. Probably gonna be a linebacker, too. Hope he doesn't get a busted up head like Billy. That'd be a shame."

"I'll kill you if you touch any of those kids."

"Maybe you don't quite understand, Jerr. You see, there's one company now. It runs the whole show. We're all working for the same boss. One company, Jerry."

Jerry stared at him.

“Oh, and that thing you were thinking about with Big Dick. Moving me out of the way. The Company’s got a lot of little birds around, and they’re always listening--”

Jerry floored it. He drove hard toward an intersection then turned right onto a country road. Bubba stayed right with him. His SUV was inches from Jerry's bumper. Jerry could see Bubba laughing and stuffing the barbecue sandwich into his mouth. Jerry saw a flash of metal in Bubba's other hand. Jerry strained to see, looking in his mirror. It was the Beretta. Bubba was loading it.

Jerry looked back at the road. A car pulled out in front of him. Jerry slammed on the brakes, locking the wheels, barely missing the car.

KABAM!

Bubba's SUV collided into the back of Jerry's car, throwing Jerry's head back against the headrest. Jerry's world suddenly went white, silent. It lasted for what seemed like an hour then Jerry flashed back to a game. He'd just been nailed by an offensive lineman. The lineman stood above Jerry, grinning through broken teeth. Jerry's leg was twisted behind him in a grotesque shape. His world was spinning--players' faces moved in and out of view. Someone called his name, a woman's voice. Jerry came around. A woman was standing nearby looking at him and saying “Mister” repeatedly. Jerry staggered out of the car and into the street.

“You alright, mister? I called the police.”

Jerry looked at Bubba's car. Bubba lay half out of the car, clutching his throat, choking on the barbecue sandwich. Jerry ran over and opened Bubba's door and ripped off his seatbelt. He threw Bubba on the ground and pummeled his chest. Bubba's face was turning the color of the sky. Jerry flipped him over and beat on his back until a chunk of barbecue flew out onto the pavement. Bubba finally gasped and took a deep breath. It took a moment for him to come around. The usual pink color came back into his plump face. He sat there, staring up at Jerry.

“This don't make it right.”

Jerry grabbed him and pulled him up. Bubba looked like a stuffed doll that had been plopped down in the middle of the road. Jerry grabbed him by the shirt and shook him.

“I saved your goddam life.”

A siren wailed in the distance. Jerry stood and listened a moment. The siren was getting closer. Bubba laughed.

“Ain't over, Jerr.”

Jerry headed for his car. He jumped inside and sped away.

Jerry drove through the back roads of South Carolina drinking beer, trying to sort it all out. He shakily put a line of coke on his hand and snorted it. He couldn't get The Company out of his head. He'd always thought The Company was just the NFL, maybe a little gambling. Now it was becoming clearer to him. The Company was a lot bigger than the NFL. The Company was the whole ball of wax--all of sports--college, professional, high school, Vegas, Atlantic City, low-life bookies in Jersey, high-priced call girls from Beverly Hills to Palm Beach, street hookers, coke, dope, pimps, the networks, agents--everything. It all made sense to him now. He flew past a gas station and a small black car fell in behind him. It was a South Carolina State Trooper driving a tricked-out Ford Mustang. The cop lit up his grill lights. Jerry knew he couldn't outrun the cop and pulled over. The cop was white with a short haircut and stick straight posture--a Marine. South Carolina hired ex-Marines for their troopers. Everybody knew you didn't fuck around with them. The trooper already had his gun drawn as he got out of the Mustang. Jerry put his hands up.

Later, Jerry sat handcuffed in the Mustang. He'd tried putting on the charm, even though he knew it wasn't going to work this time. He was being charged with leaving the scene of an accident and drunk driving. The trooper read Jerry his rights.

22. The Silence of Chelone (The Tortoise)

In the Richland county jail, Jerry lay on a cot in a small cell staring at the ceiling. For some reason, his mind was blank. He studied the ceiling tiles. On one of the tiles he could see some small words which looked like they'd been etched in stone.

"Call me flower. I've been through the mill."

Those words seemed to fit him perfectly now. He thought about Bubba. He wasn't sure why he'd saved his life. He'd made a deal with Big Dick to get Bubba off his back. Big Dick was cheap. Only \$25,000, cash and carry. Just how Big Dick was going to get Bubba off his back, Jerry hadn't asked. It was a stupid move on Jerry's part, but Big Dick had made it all sound so easy, so simple. Even with Bubba out of the way, somebody else would come after Jerry. Money never forgot. It had the memory of an elephant. All the debt that Jerry had racked up with Bubba wasn't Bubba's money. It belonged to somebody else. Jerry had crossed a lot of lines in his life, but this time he knew he'd crossed a big one. He studied the tiles again. Maybe one of them would have the answer to his problems. He kept thinking about Bubba. He and Bubba went back a long way. Maybe Bubba would cut him some slack now that Jerry saved his life, but deep down he knew he was up the creek. His mind started to drift back to his history with Bubba and the times when he'd tried to get Jerry to fix football games. Fixing games was a hard thing to do in football, especially for a linebacker. The defense didn't control the football, the scoring mechanism. The only thing the defense could do was let the other team score more points, but that always looked suspicious. It was a good way to get busted, plus you had to have the other players in on it. Secrets didn't last long on the football field. Bubba had come up with a plan.

The plan was simple, at least on paper it was simple. Take the quarterback out of the game with a shot of Rohypnol. Bubba kept a big supply that he distributed to frat boys at Duke, UNC, and N.C. State and some of the other colleges around the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill area. Drugging girls at frat parties was in high fashion at all the ACC schools and Rohypnol did the trick every time. Rohypnol--Roofies--had spread like herpes into colleges around the South. Bubba dealt it out of a bar in Chapel Hill called The Pit. It was a curious place at the bottom of a stairwell on Franklin Street on the west side of town. There was always a loud band playing, day and night. The Pit was part of Chapel Hill's answer to the overrated Athens, Georgia, music scene. The Pit sat directly below a holistic healing store run by hippies. Bubba was part owner of both places and sometimes bartender at The Pit. Frat boys showed up on Fridays and Saturdays to get their Roofie supply, usually around midnight. The trick to Roofies for the frats was never to keep any kind of Roofie

stash at the frat house, so the cops could never prove anything. The supply was always obtained on the fly, ad hoc, usually during a big party, after the woman or women had been marked. This was standard operating procedure for all the frats. No Roofie dope meant no evidence against the frat in a court of law, if it ever got that far. A lot of the fathers of the frat boys were lawyers, so the legacies would always jealously defend their spawn. In the rare cases when there was an investigation, the boys banded together and claimed the woman was trashed and drunk out of her mind when she arrived at the house. The sad fact is that it was true in most cases. The women showed up at the frats drunk, ready to party, primed and good-to-go for the house to come falling down on them. It was just sick instinct from there on out for the frat boys. The college presidents and deans were the court jesters in the whole Roofie business. Impotent fools who jealously guarded the reputation of the schools. The women college presidents were no better than the men. They propagated the banality of the fraternities even more, since the logic went that a woman president would never allow the frats to get away with their Roofie business. It was almost as if Rohypnol existed in only one place: the urine specimens of the women who'd been drugged and raped. The doctors who serviced the university students knew all about the Roofie epidemic, yet they, like the college presidents, did nothing, never raised a voice. They kept quiet in their white lab coats, behind their computers. Theirs was a curiously silent profession, as if Zeus himself had cursed them as he did Chelone, to be mute in her shell. Mute in a world that needed a voice. And now another voice was needed from the doctors, yet the healers religiously donned their school colors, attended football games, and wrote large checks to the alumni fund. The Machine--The Company--had many gears, many machinations. College presidents and medical school deans were just another cog it greased. And it greased that cog so well that it never squeaked.

The Pit was always jam packed, especially on game days. The transaction took only a minute. The frat boys would walk up to the bartender and through the din of the music yell, "Roof's on fire" for pills or "Pit's on fire" for liquid. The liquid form was quicker. It only took a minute and the girl hit the floor, out cold. The pills took about ten minutes, depending on how much alcohol the girl had already consumed. The choice of liquid or pills depended on the particular sadistic nature of the frat. Some frats preferred the liquid. The girl was out cold and they could get to their fun quicker. For other frats, pills were the preferred method. They liked to watch the girl stumble and wobble, then slowly move in circles until she dropped down to her knees like a stuck pig. That's when the boys swooped in and the girl disappeared into the house. An even more sadistic version existed at some frat houses whereby the girl was given a half dose of the pill. This usually took about an hour to play out. The boys would take turns publicly groping and humiliating her while the party

continued. When they were done with their fun, they'd slip her the rest of the pill then whisk her away.

Jerry was never involved in drugging women. He thought it was sick and fucked-up shit, something that only limp dick frat boys did. He didn't have to resort to such means. Most football players had such an abundance of ass that they usually had to shed it. Jerry thought about Bubba and the drugs and how easy it all seemed back then. He had no idea that Bubba was connected to something bigger. And now, he was starting to realize that the thing was huge--its tentacles spread everywhere. The clues were there, though. Jerry should've known Bubba had serious connections when he tried to get him to fix football games. The first time Bubba tried to get him to fix a game was Jerry's senior year at Carolina. Bubba kept dogging him for a "favor." Jerry tried to get him off his back, but Bubba threatened blackmail. He had a lot of bad things on Jerry, mostly the drugs and women. Even though the NFL wasn't enforcing any kind of standards back then, Jerry wanted to come in clean if he got drafted. He didn't want to be known as trouble the first day he sat foot in training camp at Atlanta. Bubba met him outside the locker room at the Kenan Memorial Stadium field house in Chapel Hill and gave Jerry a syringe of Rohypnol that he was supposed to inject into the quarterback who played for Wake Forest. He was a hotshot who would go on to the pros and have a big career. Jerry chickened out. It was too bizarre for Jerry. Bubba threatened him, but Jerry didn't give in. He wished he'd given up on Bubba back then. Even if he would've tried, Bubba was smart and he was clever. He knew Jerry was heading to the NFL, the big titty. He made sure to keep Jerry in lots of free dope and the occasional piece of ass while he transitioned from Carolina to Atlanta. All Bubba had to do was wait. He knew Jerry could be counted on to fuck up.

And fuck up he did. The next time Bubba tried to get Jerry to fix a game was after Jerry had been playing two years for Atlanta. He had started betting big money on games. It was the first time Jerry had any real money and he'd gone a little crazy. It wasn't just football, he'd bet on any kind of sports--horse racing in England, soccer in Brazil, fucking cricket in Abu Dhabi, he didn't care. He had a problem. He owed Bubba almost seven-hundred grand for bad bets. Of course, Bubba tacked on his bookie and other interest fees which inflated the amount. Jerry wasn't a good businessman and Bubba took full advantage. Bubba rounded the number up to an even 1.4 million dollars. Virgin NFL players were one of the gambling racket's favorite titties to suck on. Once they got into a player, it was easy pickings--a little blackmail went a long way once you made it into the NFL, especially for the younger players. It was hard to shake the vultures off. The shake-off always involved a big payoff, done under the table by company attorneys or agents if the player was worth keeping. If not, the player was cut from the team and heaved overboard into the arms of the underworld. Jerry's agent, Abramowitz, had found out about the debt, but Jerry wouldn't let him

arrange a payoff. Jerry didn't want to be indebted to Abramowitz. One debt led to another debt and another. It was a vicious circle that ended many a good player's career. He'd heard stories from veteran players about getting stuck and not being able to be traded.

Atlanta was playing San Francisco. Both teams were in the dumps. The game didn't matter, except for Vegas and the bookies. It was an away game in San Francisco at Candlestick. Bubba showed up in San Francisco at Jerry's hotel, the Four Seasons in the city. It was late on the night before the game. Everybody on the team was asleep. Bubba bribed the bellhop and told him he was Jerry's agent. Bubba even bought a nice suit to make himself look more professional and less like a yokel hoodlum. At the hotel, he pushed his way into Jerry's room and flipped open a briefcase where he had the Rohypnol shots fashioned into darts with electrical tape. It looked totally like an amateur job. The darts were small, almost like animal darts, but each had a small plunger on the end.

"I double-dosed them," Bubba said.

"Why?" Jerry asked with a worried look.

"Because he's a big fucker. Do it first quarter. They want you to take him out quick. Then we're slick on the seven-hundred grand."

Jerry did the math in his head.

"I thought it was the whole 1.4 million."

"You racked up interest, Jerr. Money ain't free, especially big money like that. The bigger the money the more the money costs. This ain't your local savings and loan."

Jerry sat on the bed, shaking his head.

"Fuck--"

Bubba reassured him.

"You can't screw this up. I'm betting my wad on you. So are a lot of other people from Jersey to Florida. If things go right, maybe I can get them to come down some on the seven grand. I'll see what I can do."

Bubba slapped Jerry on the shoulder. Jerry stared at the darts.

"I can't do it."

Bubba laughed.

"What do you mean? 'Course you can."

"I'm supposed to be playing football, not shooting players with frat boy dope."

Bubba laughed harder.

"Jerry, it's a game. Nothing but a fucking game. Don't matter how you win."

On game day, all Jerry could think about was how crazy the whole scheme was. Did this go on all the time? Was this the way things got done in the big leagues? Did this go on in other sports like baseball and basketball? He thought about all the money he owed Bubba. Somehow that helped him rationalize the whole nutty thing to himself. In the locker room, Jerry carefully tucked the Rohypnol dart in the laces of his shoe so he wouldn't accidentally shoot himself. Another linebacker almost got a glimpse of the Rohypnol dart, but he got called off by a defensive coach.

It was getting near the end of the first quarter, and Jerry was starting to get worried about Bubba's first quarter ultimatum. Was Jerry going to do it or not? What would happen if he did it in the second quarter? What would happen if he didn't do it at all? This was the craziest fucking thing he'd ever done. Doping a goddam big money quarterback on national television in front of 80,000 scream fat-fuck fans. His mind was going crazy. He felt like his body was floating over the turf, looking down on him. Was he going to do it? Fuck yes, Bubba and the money trumped football right now. This was survival. Fuck it all. Jerry had figured out the quarterback's moves and on the last play of the quarter, he faked like he was covering a receiver then slid through the line and nailed the quarterback. A couple of other players piled on giving Jerry the time he needed. He pulled out the dart then popped the quarterback in his right Achilles tendon. It was a perfect shot. Jerry punched him hard in the arm and smacked his helmet as a distraction.

As Jerry got up out of the pile, he kept a keen eye on the quarterback. He was supposed to go limp immediately, at least according to Bubba, but he got up and walked away like nothing had happened. Jerry secretly checked the dart to make sure it had worked. It was empty. Only a sparkle of the Rohypnol was left in the syringe. Jerry waited and watched. The quarterback went back to the huddle and called another play. The huddle broke and there were still no signs. All that risk and Bubba had given him a dud. As the quarterback got to the line and stood behind the center, he started to show the first signs of the Rohypnol dose. It was slow at first, but then he stepped back from the center and started to do the old duck and weave, just like a coed who'd just been "roofed" at a fraternity party in Chapel Hill or Charlottesville or Athens or Tallahassee or Atlanta. Bubba had been right. The double-dose was enough to put a horse down, but it was barely enough to drop this fucker. He was a tough sonofabitch. He started to walk in circles behind the line. The center turned back and called to him. The quarterback started muttering to himself. The coach called a timeout as the quarterback finally succumbed to the Rohypnol dose and squatted where he stood on the field. The trainers came out and checked him over. He was able to walk off the field on his own. The trainers thought he had a mild concussion and pulled him out of the game. He kept saying "fried bologna sandwich" to himself as they hauled him off the field.

Atlanta won the game by the spread that Bubba needed. Bubba was happy and Jerry was off the hook for a while, at least until Bubba came looking for the remaining 700 grand. Since it was the last game of the season, Jerry got a waiver from management and stayed in San Francisco. He said he wanted to visit relatives, but he really wanted to see an old Carolina teammate who played for the 49ers. The player had told Jerry about this crazy place down on the coast called Esalen that he'd been going to. It was the sort of place to get your head together, as he put it, one of those California things when California things were considered hip and cutting edge. Jerry was at a point in his life when that idea appealed to him. There had to be something more than head cracking and chasing skank. And maybe he could figure out how to get rid of Bubba.

Jerry and his 49er buddy drove down from San Francisco on Highway 1 along the coast, past Santa Cruz and Monterey, and then on to the Esalen Institute which was located in the Big Sur of California. The whole way down the 49er talked about the nude girls in the hot tubs, all of whom were dying to meet football players. At Esalen, Jerry went to a couple of seminars, but he quickly realized it was pure California hokum, psycho-babble for guilt-ridden middle-aged women with too much time and money on their hands. Jerry's great notion of finding an answer to his problems at Esalen was quickly replaced with looking for young ass, or any ass for that matter that didn't show signs of rotting off the bone. Finding ass at Esalen turned out to be a difficult task, even at a place where Henry Miller once hung out, proclaiming the discovery of the psycho-sexual new world. This was the guy who'd written "The Rosy Crucifixion" series and the "Tropic" books, the artsy New York intelligentsia's *erotica* books, but Miller's acolytes at Esalen looked like refugees from a Siberian gulag. And it didn't take long for Jerry to realize that this wasn't exactly a place for brothers. It was for bored, rich white ladies with too much time on their hands who were being tricked by head-shrinker charlatans, the proto-PBS gurus who broadcast their swill to the same ilk. His 49er buddy was somehow eating up all the psycho-babble. Jerry thought that maybe he was doing something wrong, not tuning in properly. Maybe he needed to chant louder, to make the right motions to the sky and sea. Then came the big moment in Jerry's search for inner peace, California style. Jerry walked out of one of the seminar rooms and headed off behind a building to take a leak. For some reason, they didn't like for you to go to the bathroom at Esalen. While he was relieving himself, he heard a noise and looked over to see one of the lecturers giving a blowjob to a Hispanic maintenance man. The maintenance man was standing on the back of an Esalen golf cart and the lecturer was kneeling down, servicing him. The lecturer had just spoken about finding your inner spirituality through natural awareness, and here he was sucking a dick in broad daylight, with seemingly no reservations about it. Jerry's instincts had told him the right thing about the place. It was the same old nutty bullshit from whitey. Jerry's suspicions were confirmed when someone,

probably a stray brother who'd been tricked into coming to Esalen for the day, spray painted a rock outside on Highway 1 that said, "Bullshit for Whitey."

Back in the jail cell, noises from the corridor and the sound of keys pulled Jerry out of his Esalen dream. The bailiff walked up and unlocked the door.

"Free to go--"

Jerry lay there, still staring at the ceiling tiles.

"Mr. Gotschall--"

Jerry finally stood, perplexed. He slowly moved out the door, shaking his head as if he were dreaming. He walked out into the lobby to see Clarissa Whitehall. She stood there, smiling at him, wearing her usual Chanel outfit.

"Sorry, we didn't get to talk at your party."

She held out her delicate hand to shake. Jerry was reluctant. She smiled.

"Let's get some coffee."

Later that night, they sat drinking coffee in a Denny's Restaurant in Columbia, South Carolina. Clarissa finished checking her messages on a platinum phone then looked Jerry in the eye.

"That's your third DUI in five years. Plus leaving the scene of an accident. And the coke. There was residue all over the car. They found some pills, some weed. That's at least six months, maybe more."

Jerry considered, staring into her clear blue eyes. She smiled.

"It's been taken care of."

Jerry sat back in his seat. She made a hand motion as if she were waving to someone outside the window.

"Poof. I've got a magic wand, Jerry. I make things go away."

She put her hand in his. He looked at it. It was as delicate and small as a child's. She squeezed his hand gently.

"Just like the old days when you were on the team and got into a little trouble. Our little fairies made it all go away. Even back in college, remember? I believe you had something against fraternity boys, Delta Sigma Chi in particular. You held one of the brothers upside down outside a fifth floor window for two hours until the Chapel Hill police talked you down. Our little pixies sprinkled their magic dust and made it all go away."

He pulled his hand away.

"I had a reason."

“We all have our reasons, Jerry. That's what makes the world go round.”

He shook his head.

“You don't understand.”

“Sure I do. I'm sure we'd all agree that frat boys deserve a lot worse than what they get.”

He rubbed his eyes and looked out the window.

“They made fun of Pops. Called him a porch nigger.”

Tears flooded his eyes. Clarissa took a long sip of her coffee.

“Things are not perfect in this world, Jerry. That's where I come in.”

He put his head down.

“I'm in big trouble.”

“You talking about Jammer Jerry's Linebacker car washes? Bad investment. We've found a buyer out in Colorado. A clean two million to you. And it's tax free because there's a loophole--something to do with out-of-state transfers of delinquent real estate in escrow. It's technical. I won't get into it right now.”

“What about the other stuff?”

She chuckled.

“The loan sharks? The drug dealers? Bookies? The little odds and ends of a football player with a bad temper and poor judgment? Piece of cake. Come on, Jerry, you think we're amateurs here?”

Jerry stared at her.

“You want me to make her shut up, don't you? Facts are facts. A lot of my friends, they're not right, their heads. Something's wrong.”

Clarissa opened her purse and pulled out a checkbook.

“Nothing is wrong, Jerry.”

She took a gold pen and wrote Jerry's name on a check then filled in the sum of one million dollars and signed her name.

“Oh, and that biker. What's his name, Big Dick?”

Jerry's eyes widened. He couldn't believe she knew about him. She smiled.

“Bubba has been your friend for a very long time. I can't believe you'd try and move him out of your way. Just remember, we are family, Jerry. A very close family. A loving family. And we want you and your family to be happy.”

She handed him the check. Jerry looked at it. A cold look came over her face.

“Let me make this clear. You went way over the line. It's not just about the kid anymore. It's about saving your family right now. You'll get the other half when things settle down.”

He stared at the check.

“Money, Jerry. It's the magic gold dust that has a way of making everybody happy. Everybody.”

She pointed outside. A wrecker was unhooking his car.

“Why don't you go home and think about it.”

She smiled and dangled the keys to him.

“Unless there's something else?”

He grabbed the keys, then her hand.

In a hotel suite in downtown Columbia, Clarissa and Jerry entered. Clarissa pointed to the bar which was full of high-end booze.

“Royal Salute, straight up for me. Be my guest.”

She disappeared. Jerry looked around the suite, checking behind curtains to make sure this wasn't some kind of set up. He went to the bar and made two drinks with the Scotch then looked around the room some more. He turned on the television. A football game was on. He watched a moment then heard a noise and looked back. Clarissa stood naked, wearing only a football helmet and jersey, her legs spread apart revealing a silky platinum bush manicured like a football field. She walked over slowly and took the drink from Jerry. She gulped it down, smiled and whispered softly.

“I like it rough.”

23. Last Call

Ivy tried to call Jerry all day and night, but he didn't answer his phone. When she finally got hold of him, it was early morning in the hotel in Columbia. Clarissa was long gone. Jerry sat up in bed as Ivy told him the news. Billy was missing. One of Jerry's neighbors had called Ivy. Jerry got in his car and drove as fast as he could back to Durham. When he pulled up at Ivy's house, she was waiting at the front door for him. She could barely talk. Jerry grabbed her.

"I got a phone call. They saw somebody take Billy."

Jerry tried to calm her.

"Take him? Where? What did they look like?"

"They said they were big. They had tattoos."

"Bikers?"

"I don't know. Why would they take Billy? What are they going to do with him. I want my baby back. Oh God, what did you get him into?"

She began to weep.

"I'm going to get him back. Okay. You've got to trust me. All they want is money. That's all. They're not going to hurt Billy."

"Why'd they take him? This got to do with drugs?"

She began to get hysterical. Jerry shook her.

"Calm down, Ivy. I'll do whatever it takes. I've got plenty of money."

She ran back into the house, crying. Jerry looked around at the neighbors in the windows behind their curtains. He got a crazy look in his eye and ran over to his car and pulled out his pistol. He started to wave it around then fired off three shots.

"You seen enough? You want some of me. Come on out here, you bunch of fat-fucks."

He walked through the yards, yelling, screaming like a madman escaped from an asylum. He was going to his place again. The windows in the houses looked like fans in the stadium to him. They were waving at him, jeering, booing. The curtains in the windows moved quicker now. He fired two more shots into the windshield of a car. Dogs started barking. He fired the remaining shots into a mailbox. A police siren wailed in the distance. He walked back slowly to his car, got inside, and took off.

That night, Jerry drove around Durham and Raleigh checking out the biker bars. He drove past a place called "Spokes" and pulled into the gravel parking lot. It was a rough club on the east side of

Durham where bikers hung out. Jerry and his buddies used to score coke there when he was playing ball for Carolina. The bikers wouldn't rat on the players because they loved the idea of football players being outside the law. As he walked inside the club, he heard a few "Jammer Jerr's" from the dark shadows of the tables. He walked up to the bartender. He grinned at Jerry.

"Jammer Jerr, where you been hiding?"

Jerry didn't hesitate getting to the point.

"Seen Big Dick?"

The bartender screwed up his face and shook his head.

"Ain't seen Big Dick in a couple months. Heard he was in jail, maybe even dead."

Jerry handed him a hundred. The bartender took the money and smiled. He pulled out a napkin and wrote something on it. Jerry looked at it. It was a partial address. The bartender scratched his head.

"Forget the exact street name--"

Jerry pulled out a couple more hundreds and threw them on the counter. The bartender took the bills and stuffed them in his shirt pocket, then nodded.

"Oh, yeah--"

He finished writing down the address: 208 Grove Street. Jerry took the napkin and looked at it.

"It's an apartment building down in south Raleigh. Ain't sure what the number is. That's all I know. Honest--"

Later that night, Jerry drove up and down Grove Street until he found Big Dick's bike parked on the side of the apartment building. Jerry parked his car and pulled out a pint of Jim Beam. He sat there waiting, drinking, trying to come up with a plan. He pulled out his revolver and checked the action, making sure it was loaded. He kept an eye on the apartment. He finished off the booze and pulled out another bottle. He rolled the window down to get a better look. As he opened the second bottle, a light came on in the apartment. He could see people moving inside. He took a long pull off the booze, checked the gun again then started to get out of the car. He heard a noise. A dark car pulled up behind him. Two men got out. Jerry watched them in the mirror. They were dressed in dark suits and built like offensive linemen. Jerry could see their thick necks and huge trapezoids which made it look as if they might split the suits at the seams. One of the men tapped on the window.

"Jerry?"

Jerry didn't look at him. He grabbed his keys, trying to start the car. He held the gun under the seat with his left hand. The other man walked around to the passenger side and jerked the door open. He reached inside and grabbed the keys. Jerry lifted the gun, but the first man yelled at him.

"Don't do it."

Jerry looked over. The second man held a machine pistol on him.

"What the fuck you doing out here, Jerry?"

Jerry was sweating now, shaking.

"Nothing--"

"Why don't you just go on home. Tell Billy's mother she'll see him tonight."

"Who are you?"

"We're your friends, Jerry."

Jerry tried to process the information. He thought about Clarissa.

"She send you?"

The first man smiled.

"Don't matter who sent us. You play this right and it'll be like none of it ever happened. Understand?"

Jerry shook his head. The second man stuck his head inside the car.

"I'll make it simple for you. She needs to keep her mouth shut or this is going to happen again. And it'll be worse next time. We can't guarantee how it'll turn out. Your protection is running out, Jerry. Understand?"

Jerry shook his head, still not understanding what was going on. He didn't have many options. He looked up in the window of the apartment. Somebody was looking out. The man with the gun punched Jerry's shoulder and threw Jerry his keys.

"Get out of here."

Jerry started the car and sped off. At Ivy's house, Jerry and Ivy sat silently at the kitchen table. It was late, past three o'clock in the morning. Ivy had locked herself in her room when Jerry first arrived. It took him an hour to talk her out and sit her at the table. He tried to explain things to her, at least what he could tell her without making her go crazy, but the more he tried to explain, the worse it got. He finally gave up. They'd sat there for over two hours without a word. There was a noise outside. Jerry got up.

"Stay here--"

Ivy jumped up. Jerry grabbed her.

“I want to see my boy.”

He pushed her back down into her chair. She got back up. He could see that she was about to get hysterical again.

“I don't want you around Billy no more. I'm getting a lawyer to stop you from seeing him.”

Jerry moved around and tried to hug her but she pushed him away.

“You're a bad influence on him. All you do is put big ideas in his head. And now he's so mixed up he doesn't know what to do. This is all your fault.”

Jerry couldn't take it anymore. He yelled at her.

“Me? This is all because of you. They don't care about me. You've got to stop protesting football or it'll happen again. And it'll be worse next time.”

Ivy shook her head and looked out the window.

“I ain't stopping. What else I got in this world except to stand up for something. Look at you. They took away half your life playing football and they're gonna take away the other half with what it's done to your head. Go on, sit there like a fool and let them run your life just like they run it so far. They ain't running my life and they ain't running my boy's life.”

Jerry stood there, silent. There was a noise at the front door. The door swung open and Billy was standing there. A door slammed outside and a car peeled off down the street. Billy looked at them without a word. Ivy jumped up and hugged him. She couldn't speak. He pushed her away. Jerry grabbed him.

“You alright?”

Billy stalked past them both and headed to his room.

The rest of the night, Jerry sat on the couch with the gun in his hand. He didn't sleep. At breakfast, nobody said a word until Ivy finally spoke up.

“I ain't stopping.”

She got up and walked out.

Jerry looked at Billy.

“Come on, Slick. Let's go for a ride.”

Billy shook his head.

“Come on now. We need to talk.”

Billy and Jerry drove around town all morning. Neither one said much of anything. Jerry kept looking over at him, making sure he was alright. Billy stared ahead. Jerry finally broke the silence.

"Something I want you to know."

"I don't want to hear nothing you got to say."

"Okay, I'm gonna make it simple then. You ready? Here goes. Use protection every time."

"You already told me that."

Jerry smacked him on the knee, trying to get him to smile.

"Else you gonna have snot-nosed brats calling you daddy from North Carolina to Hawaii."

Jerry grabbed his face and turned it, looking him in the eye.

"They didn't hurt you, did they?"

Billy shook loose. Jerry took a deep breath, trying to explain what was going on.

"Some people were trying to mess with me. Just a game they were playing. It's alright now so don't worry about it. Okay? We need to get you back training. A player's always in training, no matter what."

Jerry slowed the car and pulled into a cemetery. Billy looked around, not sure what Jerry was up to.

"What's this?"

"Good place to toss the ball around. Ain't nobody gonna bother us here."

Jerry drove inside and stopped the car. He grabbed a football from the backseat and got out. Billy stayed put.

"Come on, Slick. Don't tell me you're scared of haints."

Jerry opened his door. Billy got out reluctantly. Jerry motioned for him to follow and they began to walk through the cemetery. He led him to the grave of Billy's father, William P. Gotschall. Jerry touched the headstone with the football.

"Your daddy was a better player than me. Way better. Coulda played pro ball, but he didn't like their rules. Always wanted to do it his way. Your daddy would've been so proud of you."

Billy looked up.

"What, for giving up?"

"You ain't given up nothing, Slick. You're in a tough place. That's why your daddy's so proud of you. He knows you're gonna figure it all out. We're all gonna figure this thing out together."

"You figured it out yet, Unk?"

Jerry smiled.

“Damn right I figured it out. I found somebody to buy the car washes, make us all millionaires. Go long.”

Billy hesitated. Jerry pumped the football, making the motion for Billy to take off running.

“Come on. Let’s see what you got. Training never stops.”

Billy took off, jogging slowly. Jerry threw the ball. It hit Billy square in the hands but he dropped it. Jerry laughed and dismissed it.

“Ball must’ve been wet. Throw it back.”

Billy sat beside a grave.

“What's wrong, Slick.?”

Billy shook his head.

“Tired.”

Jerry ran over, making sure Billy was alright.

“Come on. Let's go get a milkshake at Sonny's. Gotta replenish those muscles.”

Later at Sonny's, Jerry and Billy sat at a table, eating hamburgers and drinking milkshakes. Jerry still seemed worried about Billy. Jerry finished the last of his hamburger in one big bite.

“Used to eat six of these before every game when I was at Carolina. They delivered back then. We pretty much kept this place in business.”

Billy got a funny look in his eyes. Something was on his mind.

“Unk, I need to ask you a question.”

Jerry nodded as he drank the milkshake.

“Is it just about the money, or something else? It’s got to be about something.”

Jerry drained the milkshake as he thought about the question. He watched the clerk at the window scratching an order on a pad. The bullshit, the locker room chit-chat, seemed to go out of his mind for a moment.

“You know, I used to get asked for my autograph all the time. Strangers would come up to me, could be anywhere, anybody, on the street, restaurants, airports. ‘Hey, Jammer Jerr, can I get your autograph, man?’”

Jerry finished his milkshake then tossed his cup in the trash.

“That was enough for me, being recognized, just being somebody. But then, something happened, it all changed. Don't know what, but it was like one day somebody just flipped a switch,

rang a bell, I don't know. Just being somebody wasn't good enough anymore. I needed something else.”

Billy looked him in the eye.

“What?”

Jerry thought about it then shook his head.

“I don’t know.”

A car rode by, painted Carolina blue with its horn blaring and fans hanging out and screaming. All the fans were painted Carolina blue like the car.

“You better go see your momma. Need a ride?”

Billy shook his head.

“Tell your momma you love her. She needs to hear it from you. And give her a big hug, tight as you can. Okay? Promise me.”

Billy shrugged. Jerry grabbed him and pulled him close then hugged him hard. Jerry walked over to his car and got inside. He watched Billy get up slowly and start walking out of the parking lot. Jerry looked in the mirror. He had tears streaming down his face. This time, they were real tears. As he started his car, a car horn sounded. Jerry spun around to see a long white limo pull up beside him. Clarissa Whitehall stepped out of it, looking elegant as ever. She could've been going to a cocktail party in New York. She called to him.

“Number 53?”

Jerry walked up and tapped on his window. He rolled it down.

“Our associates in Colorado have doubled their offer. Four million. All tax free, of course. We need an answer by tomorrow or the deal's off. Now's your chance to get on the right side of the line once and for all.”

He stared at her a long moment then laughed.

“Got a question for you.”

“Sure.”

“You sleep at night?”

She smiled as she watched the kids clowning around at Sonny’s.

“Like a baby.”

She pulled out her phone.

“I can make the call right now. Everybody wins, Jerry. Number 53 will be a hero again. Game over.”

He looked at her a long moment then drove away. She watched him then dialed a number.

24. Fourth and Goal

At Short Stuff's restaurant, Ivy worked the drive-thru window. The restaurant was full of students and fans trying to get some Short Stuff's barbecue before the game between N.C. State and Carolina in Raleigh. Shorty wore a red Wolfpack hat and a Carolina blue sweatshirt. He hurriedly took orders from students and fans. Doris stepped up to the counter. Shorty recognized her face from the protests he'd seen on television.

"Can I help you?"

"I've got something for Ivy."

Shorty shook his head.

"We're really busy now."

She handed him a button and a hat. They both had the same words on them: "FOOTBALL HURTS US." Shorty took them reluctantly and shook his head. He yelled for Ivy. Ivy stepped up. She'd already spotted Doris. Shorty was getting angrier by the second. Doris smiled at Ivy.

"I've got two boxes full of buttons and hats. I've got a whole carload of tee-shirts coming. Sweatshirts, too. My cousin owns a printing company in Hillsborough."

She pointed to two boxes on a table. Ivy took a hat and looked at it. Doris smiled.

"One size fits all."

A fraternity boy painted in Carolina blue called out to Shorty.

"Hey, my ribs. I ordered eight full racks for our frat, Delta Sig."

Shorty smiled at his customers waiting in line then yelled back to the kitchen.

"Eight full. Where are my eights? Anybody working back there? Come on, people!"

Ivy looked at Shorty, hoping he'd go along with the hats and buttons. The look on his face was an obvious no. Car horns began to honk outside. Other customers in the restaurant were starting to complain.

"Get back to that window, Ivy."

Ivy hesitated. Shorty gave her a look.

It was less than a half-mile walk for Billy from Sonny's to Short Stuff's Barbecue. Billy sat in the parking lot, drinking the last of the milkshake, watching his mother at the drive-thru window as she juggled the food and the money. A car loaded with teenagers pulled up, laughing and carrying on. Ivy spoke into the microphone. Her voice echoed across the parking lot.

“Can I take your order please?”

The driver stuck his head out the window and mumbled some words.

“I want a mmmmmm--”

Ivy spoke louder into her microphone.

“Can you repeat your order please?”

Another teenage boy stuck his head out from the back seat.

“He wants a mmmmmm. Two of them. With french fries and a mmmmmm--”

Billy was watching it all. Another kid stuck his head out of the car and mumbled something else. Billy couldn't take any more. He jumped up and ran over to the car and stood in front of it. The kids looked at him and laughed. The driver stuck his head out and yelled at Billy.

“Hey, boy, you taking my order?”

One of the kids recognized Billy.

“It's the retard football player with brain damage.”

Billy ran around and opened the passenger door, jerked the kid out then threw him on the grass. They began to wrestle. The other boys jumped out of the car and piled on Billy then threw him across the car. Billy jumped back up. They came at him and tackled him. They all rolled across in the parking lot in a jumble. Ivy and Shorty came tearing out of the restaurant. Shorty pulled the boys off Billy. The cook and another man helped Shorty hold the boys back. Ivy pulled Billy up. He wiped his lip which was swelling. He had cuts and scrapes all over his face and arms.

“They were making fun of you.”

The driver pointed at Ivy.

“You're that crazy lady trying to stop us from playing football.”

Shorty shoved the boy toward his car.

“Why don't you boys just run home to your mommas.”

The boys jumped in their car and tore off across the parking lot. A news van drove up. Shorty shook his head and cursed when he saw it. A reporter and camera were suddenly in Ivy's face. The reporter pushed a mic in close.

“Mrs. Gotschall, are you going to continue to protest football?”

Ivy pushed away.

“I don't want to talk to you people anymore.”

The reporter dogged her.

“There are reports that students at Shaw University in Raleigh are petitioning for a moratorium on football until more is known about head injuries.”

Shorty stepped forward.

“Ma'am, this is a private business. We don't have anything to say.”

Ivy turned and grabbed the microphone from the reporter. She looked toward the camera.

“I'm sick and tired of people playing both sides of the fence. Doctors, lawyers, everybody. Football hurts people. Everybody knows it's the truth.”

She looked at Shorty long and hard. Doris stepped up. She was holding the protest hats and buttons. She held them out for everyone. Shorty considered a long moment then slowly removed his Short Stuff's Barbecue hat and replaced it with a “FOOTBALL HURTS US” hat. He put a hat on Ivy's head then on the reporter's head. Shorty smiled reluctantly at the camera. The reporter made a motion to the cameraman. He moved in close on Billy. The reporter shoved the mic in Billy's face.

“You're Billy Gotschall, correct?”

Billy shrugged.

“Do you have anything to say?”

Billy looked around at the crowd that was now gathered. He looked at his mother.

“Billy, what do you want to tell everyone about football?”

Billy looked into the camera.

“Football--”

There was the screech of tires from a speeding car and then a short popping sound rang out, followed quickly by two more pops, exactly like the first. It sounded like a car backfiring. Shorty was the first one hit. He made a funny sound then sat down in the parking lot as if he were sitting down to a plate of barbecue. Everyone spun around to look at him. Everyone except Billy and Ivy.

Jerry sat in his kitchen, drinking straight Jack Daniels. The bottle was almost empty. The television was going in the other room. He kept thinking about the look in Clarissa's eye, the tone of her voice. The announcer's voice on the television caught his attention. The game between N.C. State and Carolina was starting in Raleigh at Carter-Finley stadium. Jerry headed downstairs to his recreation room and took a jersey out of the glass case. He put it on then looked at himself in the mirror. He grabbed an old UNC Tarheels helmet and put it on. He looked in the mirror again, yelled, and banged his head against it, shattering the glass.

Five minutes later, he was driving toward the Carter-Finley stadium in Raleigh, still wearing the helmet. He cracked open another fifth of Jack Daniels and tried to drink it through the face guard.

He slung the helmet out the window then chugged the fifth halfway down. He did a line of coke, then another. Fans drove past headed for the game, honking and cheering. Jerry stared ahead, oblivious, a dull look in his eye. When he got to the stadium, he'd put away all but a couple of fingers of the second fifth of liquor. As he sat alone in the parking lot, he took one final pull off the liquor then stumbled out of his car and made his way toward a back gate reserved for players and staff. As he got near a door that led into the stadium, he saw Clarissa's limo parked nearby. He could barely make out her face behind the dark windows. She was talking on her phone. She saw him but she kept talking. She didn't seem interested in him anymore. He stood there a long moment, waiting, but there was no reaction from her. Jerry entered a side door that went to the locker rooms. He was crazy drunk now. He staggered down a long corridor. He could barely control his weaving and rolling. He fell against the wall and tried to straighten himself. A trainer walked out of a storeroom, loaded down with towels. He recognized Jerry.

"Jammer Jerr, that you?"

Jerry pumped himself up.

"Hey, yeah. Thought I'd stop by and say hello to all the guys. Been a while. I wanted them to know--I love this game--just love it--"

He lost his balance and almost fell over. The trainer grabbed him and straightened him up.

"Yeah, okay, Jerr. Take care, man."

The trainer gave him a wary look then headed out to the field. Jerry looked in the storeroom. He staggered inside and grabbed a handful of towels. He found a cracked Carolina Tarheels helmet and put it on his head. It was a tight fit. He careened out of the storeroom then staggered down the tunnel toward the field. As he emerged in the daylight, he almost fell down a small set of stairs that led down to the field. A horn blew, signaling halftime. The sound knocked Jerry back. He gathered himself then hid his face as the players ran past on their way to the locker rooms. He finally made his way onto the edge of the field, and looked out toward a podium with a microphone on the 50-yard line. He weaved his way across the end zone and fell, then pulled himself up and continued toward the middle of the field. People in the stands thought it was part of the halftime entertainment. Laughter began to break out in pockets. Jerry finally got to the podium and staggered up. He grabbed the microphone and tapped it. Feedback rang across the stadium.

"Uh, hello. Hello, I got something I wanna say."

His voice echoed with more feedback. He could barely stand. He took a deep breath and spread his arms to the crowd.

"I'm Jerry Gotschall. I used to play for Carolina. Called me Jammer Jerr. Some of you might remember me."

He paused, waiting for a response from the crowd. There was nothing but confused laughter. Tears flooded his eyes.

"Thing is, I love this game. I love it so much. I got so many friends who played this game. And I love 'em all."

The laughter started turning to boos. Jerry continued. He was trying hard how to overcome the liquor's grip on his brain.

"We all worked so hard to make this a great game--for you--the fans. But I can't just sit back and be quiet. Something's wrong. This thing didn't start with my nephew Billy when he got hurt. It started a long time ago. And we've all known about it, but I guess we all hoped somehow it would go away. But it ain't going away."

The boos grew louder. Fans began throwing ice and paper onto the field. Jerry kept going.

"I don't know what the answer is. But we all got to try an' figure it out. I'm standing here saying what I know to be the truth. And I'm proud of that. Jammer Jerr is proud of what he did today. Been a long time since I was able to say that--"

The mic went dead, but Jerry kept talking. The crowd booed louder. Police and security guards ran onto the field. Two security guards jumped up on the podium and tackled him, knocking him to the turf. Jerry was suddenly at home again. The boozy fragrance of the grass, the screaming fans. Adrenaline shot through his body. He wrestled away from the guards, jumped up and ran toward the sidelines, knocking cameramen and other people over. The fans were buzzing with laughter now. Some of them still thought it was part of the halftime show. It was part of the show, except this time Jammer Jerry wasn't playing on any team. He was all alone, running as hard as he could to meet his destiny.

Outside the stadium, Jerry ran through the crowd, pushing people aside as he headed for the exit. He made it to his car, jumped inside, and took off across the parking lot, barely missing fans, crashing through barriers and stop signs. As he weaved his way back to Durham on the freeway, he didn't notice that a car was following him. He finally made his way to his womb on Holloway Street, the first Linebacker Car Wash he'd built. He parked his car in the far bay then pulled the pistol from the glove box. He clumsily put the bullets in the chamber. It took all his concentration to load the gun. He cocked the trigger. He pointed the gun at his temple. Time seemed to stand still. He moved the gun closer until it touching his skin. His finger moved tighter on the trigger. Tears rolled down his face as he stared up at the Linebacker sign. The sign flickered, not much, just a flash of light.

Maybe it was his imagination. He put more pressure on the trigger. The hammer on the gun moved back a millimeter at a time. Jerry's face was wet with perspiration, his eyes wide with fear, the blood roared in his head.

Jerry's mind was flashing his life of football again, every punishing hit he ever gave or took, the guttural sounds and images of men grunting, yelling, screaming, being hit, being pummeled, bones snapping, sinew tearing, sweat, blood, spit, piss, snot, shit, broken teeth, broken bones, a finger lying in the dirt, a cleated leg, fans cheering, a bloody ear hanging loose, a lacerated eyeball, white bone sticking out of flesh, crying. It got faster and louder--louder, louder, louder--until he looked up at the sign. It flickered again and then it stayed on. Jerry stared at it, reading the words on the sign to himself.

"The Linebacker, let Jammer Jerry tackle that dirt."

He sat there a moment then started to laugh until he was almost hysterical. Something seemed to come to him--a moment of clarity.

"Ain't nothin' but a game--"

He tossed the gun out the window and turned the key in the ignition. A black van drove up and stopped in front of Jerry's car. Two quick sounds rang out from the van. The bullets pierced the windshield of Jerry's car, making two tiny holes. Jerry slumped over in the seat, looking as if he were bending over searching for something. Moments later, two ambulances flew past the car wash on a nearby freeway. They were carrying Ivy and Billy to the Duke Emergency room. Ivy would be pronounced DOA. Billy would live another day.

In a grimy bar in south Raleigh, Bubba sat watching the news on television, eating a barbecue plate. Jerry's face was on screen. A reporter was giving the details of what happened.

"Jerry Gotschall, former NFL linebacker for Atlanta, pulled some sort of stunt today at Carter-Finley stadium in Raleigh. Gotschall, also known as Jammer Jerry, was evidently intoxicated when he wandered onto the field and began to rant incoherently. Mr. Gotschall has numerous arrests for public intoxication and assault dating back to his days at the University of North Carolina where he was a star linebacker. Mr. Gotschall was found dead later today in one of his Linebacker car washes in Durham. Police say it was probably gang and drug related..."

Bubba's phone rang. He answered and listened a few moments, then sat the phone on the table. He took his time and finished his barbecue sandwich then finished off his beer. He looked up at the television which now showed the faces of Jerry, Ivy and Billy. He shook his head.

"Got to play by the rules. How many times did I tell you, Jerr?"

Nearby, a newspaper reporter sat drinking and talking to the bartender. That reporter would write the story that a police detective was just starting to investigate. The story would be about the deaths of Jerry, Ivy and Billy. The story would be unremarkable, a football player involved in drugs and the sports underworld with some extortion and kidnapping thrown in as a diversion from the real truth. It would soon be a closed case by the investigators. Nothing out of the ordinary. That's the way The Company did things. Nice and tidy with a bow, just like a Super Bowl half-time show. Bubba threw a few bills on the table and walked out the door. Someone in the bar switched the channel on the television. The upbeat announcer came over.

"It's been another great year of football for all you Carolina fans out there and now we're entering the playoff season. We hope you all stay tuned for highlights. God, how I love this game."

Another announcer's voice echoed the sentiments with an emotional tremolo in his voice. It was of course, all fake, just like everything else in sports.

"And you're not the only one--"

25. The Little Green Fairy

Okay, looks like Mr. Edward P. Rose is finished. I could go on, but I think that's about all I have to say. Plus, I'm not sure you want to hear me go on much longer. Wait, I think I finally see the little green fairy. What good timing. Maybe she's an angel coming to take me home to that great big green playing field in the sky. Maybe she's going to put an end to all my crazy egg problems. No matter what, I'd like to give you some advice before I go. Take care of your egg because you only get one. Especially take care of your egg if you're a football player, because you don't want to end up like me, swilling booze, snorting coke, and waiting to see the little green fairy before they haul you off to the old folks home. Remember this word if you don't remember anything else about this book, because this is all you get.

One.

The End.

26. Appendix

Letter to a University President

Dear Cocksucker Pimp Man (or Woman),
How in the fuck can you allow 100 young men at your great university to bash their eggs in while you claim to be a place of great learning? Is it about the money? Of course it is, cocksucker. I suggest you see the Do-It-Yourself Egg Busting Kit below and give it a try.

Kind Regards,
<Your Name>

P.S. Oh, and what's the deal with fraternities on campus? Do you know what fraternity boys do to all the pretty Goldilocks who line up to get into the party on Saturday night after the big football game? Of course you do, because you did it yourself. You might want to tell the medical school dean to lock up the fraternity boys' supply of Rohypnol (Roofies if you prefer).

Letter to a Medical School Dean

Dear Frogfucker,
Why do you let that cocksucker who runs the joint allow 100 young men at your great university to bash their eggs in while you claim to be a practitioner of the healing arts? Is it about the money? Of course it is, Frogfucker. I suggest you see the Do-It-Yourself Egg Busting Kit below and give it a try. Maybe you and the university president can use it on each other. Oh, and lock up the Roofies from the frat boys if you get a chance. I know you've got a busy schedule and all, but all the coeds would really appreciate it if you did a little something to stop university-sponsored rape on campus.

Kind Regards,
<Your Name>

DIY Egg-Busting Kit

Do-It-Yourself instructions for University Presidents who still think football is a great sport for young men in the prime of life to engage in.

Note 1: These instructions can also be used for medical school deans.

Note 2: All parties are absolved of any violence as described in the university handbook since these are football simulation instructions. Football, as you know, is not considered violent at any American university or college.

Required Items:

- One university president (aka, The Pimp)
- One baseball bat (aluminum or wood). A 38-inch Hillerich & Bradsby Louisville Slugger made of ash is preferred
- One football helmet (any kind will work since they all give the same result--no protection of the egg inside the skull that will soon receive the blows from the Louisville Slugger bat)
- One secretary (or admin, as you might call them)
- One small stool, approximately two feet in height

Directions:

1. Put football helmet on university president's head. Copious quantities of oil, grease or butter may be needed to ensure the helmet is properly fitted and snug.
2. Put baseball bat in secretary's hands.
3. Have secretary stand on small stool about three feet behind the university president.
4. Have secretary swing at university president's head. Full force is suggested.

IMPORTANT: Secretary should take precautions, since falling off the stool could cause ankle injury. Consult your university workmen's compensation manual to ensure you do not get injured. Any injuries to the secretary should be reported immediately.

5. Repeat step 4 twenty times during the day, preferably before important meetings or interviews with the press.

6. Repeat these steps every day of the university president's tenure and then for ten years hence, just to make sure he gets the full effect.

20,000 Egg Cracks

This is what 20,000 cracks (hits) to the head looks like on paper as X's and O's. It's the average number of egg cracks an NFL linebacker or lineman would receive during a 20-year career as a football player, if he started with Pee-Wee league football (around age 8) and ended in the NFL (around age 28). The **X's** are probable CONCUSSIONS (2% of hits, a conservative estimate).

The math gets more interesting when you consider that there are hundreds of active players and thousands of veteran players. This is just for the NFL. When you take into account all the young men who played up through high school and college football, then the numbers move into the millions of egg cracks. The number of concussions is in the tens, if not hundreds, of thousands. *This egg crack's for you!*

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===== 20,000 Egg Cracks for One NFL player =====

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40 groups of 500 egg cracks = 20,000 hits to the head (400 concussions [2%] of varying severity, denoted by **x**).

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0000000000	0000000000	0000000000	0000000000	00000x0000
0000000000	0000000000	000000000x	0000000000	0000000000
0000000000	0000000000	0000000000	00000x0000	0000000000
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--- Next 500 egg cracks ---

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[illegible]

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